

Feedback in Professional Learning Communities: Exploring Teachers' and Administrators'
Experiences and Implications for Building Systemic and Sustained Learning

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Dedication

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Abstract

American educators are provided with far less time to improve their professional practice than their international counterparts, often experience professional development in short and disjointed ways, and work in systems whose structures too frequently isolate them from the practice of their colleagues. Professional learning communities (PLCs), however, recognize that improved teacher learning is essential to improved student learning and thus create structures which engage educators in regular, job-embedded, collaborative action research directly tied to their individual teaching contexts. However little is known about the specific feedback which educators in PLCs provide and the ways in which various feedback loops in educational systems assist in improving teacher practice. How does feedback made available through a PLC model impact the practice of teachers and administrators? This phenomenological study utilized a pre/post design to explore the role of feedback in the lives of two administrators and eight high school English educators at a central Wisconsin high school. The findings discuss the ways in which participants gave and received feedback prior to their involvement in PLCs and how feedback changed as their school and district adopted a PLC model. The study identified five major themes: 1) the need to build trust to encourage an open sharing of practice; 2) reduced isolation, improved collaboration and increases in the amount of and teachers' desire for additional feedback; 3) a shift from covering content to assessing student learning through instructionally-sensitive data sources; 4) the need to consider feedback and power implications when mandating structures, increasing transparency and enhancing accountability so as to improve feedback and reduce frustration; and 5) critical considerations in systemic structures including fostering collaboration, making feedback meaningful, and addressing the key issue of time. The study concludes with recommendations for teachers, administrators, district policy makers and researchers, pointing to ways in which those working in educational systems can develop feedback structures which heighten teacher learning.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Education takes place, at its core, in the individual interactions between a teacher and a student and the quality of this interaction is therefore of critical importance to the success of our nation's school-aged children (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Such a belief drives school systems throughout the country to mandate professional development for our nation's teachers, requiring that they spend time attending outside coursework and workshops or selecting from school or district offerings. Unfortunately short workshops which result in little change in educator practice are, according to Darling-Hammond (2010), the most frequent type of learning opportunity provided to U.S. teachers. When professional development is isolated, disjointed and decontextualized from the work conducted in teachers' classrooms the work of Darling-Hammond (2010), among others, suggests there is little impact on actual teacher practice.

Even if such professional development is successful, once the experience is completed teachers still too often return to the isolation of their own classrooms, effectively cutting off themselves and their students from the collective knowledge of their peers. In such educational contexts students move from one teacher to the next, often with little continuity across grade levels and content areas; the result is a disjointed and unequal educational experience from year to year (Senge, Cambren-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000). The success of our students therefore depends not only on individual teacher quality but also on the collective capacity of our educational systems. Students, schools and school systems reap the cumulative benefits when the number of expert educators in a system increases. When systems are organized in ways which provide teachers with frequent and extended opportunities to dialogue, seek out, share and actively apply professional knowledge, such benefits are made available throughout the system (Elmore, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

In light of this information some schools have begun to form professional learning communities (PLCs). Although the term is often used in varying circumstances, DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006) qualify professional learning communities as

...educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

PLCs provide educators with substantial time and frequent opportunities to share practice, unify curriculum, create common assessments, collaboratively set goals and examine data to monitor progress. Such work creates and maintains a continuous and self-renewing cycle focused on improving both student and teacher learning. Educators in learning communities focus not on abstract ideas but rather on their unique teaching contexts and the students they work with every day, using multiple forms of formative and summative data to guide their continual inquiry. As a result of this ongoing dialogue educators share their teaching knowledge, offer support and advice, improve their ability to examine student assessments and teach in ways which help students create high-quality work. Educators feel an increased collective responsibility for the success of all students when engaged in such recursive and reflective practice (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Earl & LeMahieu, 1997).

Although there is a general understanding of the importance of such work and the benefits of professional learning communities, little is known regarding the specific types of feedback members provide, the ways in which team members reflect upon and react to such feedback and how, if at all, classroom practice is modified in light of this new information. This phenomenological study explored the formal and informal feedback loops involved both between

the members of a PLC team and between the team and the administrators that oversee them. Using a pre/post design, the study focused on building descriptions of the lived experiences of participants prior to involvement in a professional learning community to understand the type of work and feedback they looked to as they strove to improve their teaching practice and how, if at all, this work, the sources or types of feedback they received, and how they modify practice currently having become members of a PLC team has changed because of this experience. In so doing the study aimed to arrive at the essence of best practice approaches to providing and receiving feedback when working with and within a PLC team and arranging structures for their success.

Background

Although teacher quality is seen as one of if not the most important variable in education (Sanders & Rivers, 1996), time for job-embedded professional development in the United States is far less frequent than in top-performing systems around the world. American educators attend just as many workshops as their international counterparts but have far fewer extended and collaborative learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Richardson, Andree & Orphanos, 2009). In a review of the literature Darling-Hammond (2010) found that teachers in high-achieving nations are allowed to use 40 to 60% of their time to prepare and learn to teach well, while in the United States teachers only receive three to five hours per week to plan instruction and often conduct this work in isolation. Further highlighting the contrasting working conditions, teachers in the United States spend roughly 80% of their time teaching versus the 60% average in other countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) write that

In most European and Asian countries, instruction takes up *less than half* [emphasis added] of a teacher's working time. The rest – generally 15 to 20 hours per week – is

spent on tasks related to teaching such as preparing lessons, marking papers, meeting with students and parents, and working with colleagues. (p. 15)

The dominant professional development model in the United States which divorces professional development from the daily work of teachers and maintains segregated teaching and learning practices stands in sharp contrast to the job-embedded professional development opportunities which are a regular feature of top-performing systems. Schools and school systems seeking to improve the collective impact of the system's teachers create structures through which

...teachers regularly observe each others' practice [to build] an environment which stimulates the sharing of knowledge on what works and what does not, encourages teachers to give each other feedback, and helps to shape a common aspiration and motivation for improving the quality of instruction. (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 31)

Integrating structures which encourage such collaborative and job-embedded professional development on a regular basis has become common in the highest-performing international school systems. Having already invested heavily in such professional development, international systems continue to build on past successes; as Sahlberg (2009) notes, "Even the nations where educational performances are celebrated are investing significantly in further development of teachers, schools and districts" (p. 77).

The Japanese, for instance, take a "lesson study" (*kenkyuu jugyou*) approach to professional development. Every teacher is required to periodically prepare an exemplar lesson aimed at achieving specific learning goals developed collaboratively within a teacher study group. As the lesson is taught the members of the study group both observe the lesson and record its essence in a number of ways, often including audio- and video-recordings and focusing their notes on instructional elements of interest to the teacher. As each member of the group periodically presents a lesson over a 3-4 week period teams meet after each lesson to review the

instruction, identify strengths and weaknesses and generate ways in which future lessons might be improved so as to increase student learning. Teams typically spend 10-15 hours every 3-4 weeks engaged in such activities. Time for such collaboration is available daily seeing as students are dismissed one to two hours before the end of teachers' work days so as to make regular and substantial time available for such collegial work and instructional planning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Chassels & Melville, 2009; Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Such an approach reinforces the need of the system to maintain high-quality instruction while leaving individual choices to educators who are tasked with helping their students learn. In an interview with Sparks (2004) Andy Hargreaves notes that as systems strive to improve learning "the best answers are not standardized, prescribed, or inflexible. They are ones that communities of teachers drawing on the research evidence and on each other's experience develop and continually review over time" (p. 47). Japanese lesson study exemplifies this approach to professional development.

The educational reforms in Finland likewise utilize substantial time for contextualized and job-embedded development which, over the past two decades, have made it one of the highest performing systems in the world. Educators in Finland, according to Barber & Mourshed (2007), are provided with "one afternoon each week for joint planning and curriculum development... [and] work together to develop the curriculum and the instructional strategies tailored to the needs of their school," materials which are created and shared throughout the system (p. 32). Such work is supported by official education policies aimed at providing schools and teachers with the flexibility they need to address the ever-shifting needs of individual learners. Sahlberg (2007) notes that policies and practices have been aligned to "encourage continual innovation... address learning in a broader context [while] valuing diversity in individual student growth, and [promote] a system of intelligent accountability... and professionalism in which educators are trusted to make choices... and report progress" (p. 152).

Working in such an environment educators are encouraged to be innovative and creative, to test out new methods and pedagogical approaches, to test their effectiveness and share this learning with others. Sahlberg (2007) notes that this “intelligent accountability in the Finnish education context preserves and enhances trust among teachers, students, school leaders and education authorities in the accountability processes and involves them in the process, offering them a strong sense of professional responsibility and initiative (Fullan, 2005; Sahlberg, 2006b)” (p. 154).

Unfortunately opportunities for American educators to engage in such meaningful and job-embedded learning lag far behind their international counterparts. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) write, “professional learning in [American schools]... is poorly conceived and deeply flawed. Teachers lack time and opportunities to view each other’s classrooms, learn from mentors, and work collaboratively. The support and training they receive is episodic, myopic, and often meaningless” (p.2). Although research has shown that 50 hours or more must be devoted to professional development each year if it is to impact teacher practice, American educators report being given far less time for such work. Over half of the teachers taking the 2003-2004 national Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) indicated they had received 16 hours (two full days) or less of professional development in the last 12 months and only 23% said they had spent 33 hours or more engaged in professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Countries which currently outperform the United States on international assessments embed substantial time for ongoing and collaborative professional development into the fabric of the school day and invest heavily in supporting these practices. Such consistent and wide-spread efforts are not common in American educational systems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). High-achieving nations and U.S. school districts embrace and invest heavily in a systemic view of education, focusing on teacher quality, the development of assessments which tap creativity and

require ambitious learning on the part of both teachers and students, and prize reflection, learning, and improvement as the chief mission of the system (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In the Finnish school system, for instance, Sahlberg (2007) writes that

Most compulsory traditional in-service training has disappeared. In its place are school- or municipality-based longer term programs and professional development opportunities. Continuous upgrading of teachers' pedagogical professionalism has become a right rather than an obligation.... As a consequence of strengthened professionalism in schools, it has become understood that teachers and schools are responsible for their own work and also solve most problems rather than shift them elsewhere. (p. 155)

Few American schools take such an approach to professional development.

As a result, the majority of American educators work in isolated situations which lock away teaching knowledge in individual classrooms, thereby removing potential sources of feedback from the educational system. Such an approach is counterproductive; as Fullan (2005) notes, improvement is found in "the daily habit of *working together*, and you can't learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose" (p. 69; emphasis in original). Some of the most successful school districts in the United States thus work to break down isolation and build effective feedback loops into their systems so that educators are continually learning. Barber and Mourshed (2007) note that in such systems "teachers work together, plan their lessons jointly, observe each others' lessons, and help each other improve [through...] collaborative planning, reflection on instruction, and peer coaching [which] are... constant features of school life. This enables teachers to develop continuously" (p. 28). Such approaches encourage the sharing of knowledge and the giving and receiving of feedback to improve instruction, making them "some of the best performing of all of the systems... studied" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 31).

Statement of Problem

The need for American educators to avoid implementing stock programs and instead work collaboratively to share practice, reflect upon data and change the focus of instruction from what is taught to what is learned is a clear message in the literature. As Fullan (2010a) writes, “DuFour and colleagues (2010), Elmore (2004), Reeves (2010) and I are all crystal clear.... *The solution is not a program. It is a small set of common principles and practices relentlessly pursued....* Professionals working together with focus is what counts” (p. 59; emphasis in original). The collective quality of educator practice improves when teachers have substantial time dedicated to dialogue about instructional planning and practice and to provide, receive and reflect upon feedback from multiple data sources.

The professional learning communities (PLC) model used by some schools and districts in the United States holds the potential to engage educators in such work. Little is known, however, about specific formal and informal feedback loops at play in PLC systems and the impact certain types of feedback have on educator practice. What type of work and what types of feedback did teachers utilize prior to their involvement in a professional learning community to improve their instructional practice? What types of feedback do teachers and administrators in professional learning communities provide to their colleagues? Having experienced the PLC model, what forms of data and feedback, both formal and informal, do teachers and administrators identify as having had the largest impact on their practice? What, in short, are the best practices of giving and receiving feedback in professional learning communities? Fine-grained examples of such research are not prevalent in the literature and would add to the research on professional learning communities (M. Fullan, personal communication, August 6, 2011).

Statement of Purpose

The central purpose of this study was to learn how educators and administrators described the type of feedback they utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they have given and received feedback having worked within such a model, and how their membership and the feedback they have received through this model has led to a modification of instruction. The research utilized a phenomenological approach intent on building descriptions of how educators experienced the role of feedback prior to and as a member of a professional learning community and the impact of these experiences on their professional thinking and practice. The results of this study assist in uncovering the role of data and feedback in educators' pre- and post-PLC experiences and provide detailed descriptions of how educators experience the work of PLC groups, thus adding to the literature on professional learning communities and the ways in which they might function more effectively. Furthermore, although deeply contextualized, the results of this study are highly transferable to professional learning communities working in similar contexts. This study serves to explore the role of data and feedback systems which are too often overlooked or ignored within professional learning communities. Hord and Sommers (2008) note that little research exists which has explored professional learning communities, and that which has passed over the role that feedback loops play in such systems. This phenomenological study addresses this need.

Research Questions

The following questions have guided this study:

1. How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice?

2. What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?

3. How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide?

4. How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice have changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community?

5. What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice?

Significance of Study

American educators lag behind their international colleagues in terms of time spent developing their professional skills, and when such opportunities do exist they usually take place through brief and isolated experiences. Furthermore, there is limited data regarding the actual workings within professional learning communities and how, if at all, involvement in a PLC leads to a modification of practice. Although substantial research supports the benefits of PLCs and the types of work they should engage in, little is known about the internal activities of such groups as the concepts are actually implemented.

Concrete examples of the types of conversations which educators have, the ways in which they give, receive and reflect upon feedback and the role that formal and informal feedback loops play in impacting pedagogical practices are presently missing from the literature and need to be more thoroughly understood. Harris and Lambert (2003) stress that simply changing school structures so that teachers have opportunities for conversation often results in work which is

“random, erratic and personality-dependent. An information and feedback system needs to be *consciously planned and implemented* [emphasis added]... to involve everyone with similar frequency and quality [which includes] respectful listening, asking essential questions, [and] giving and receiving specific feedback” (pp. 124-125). Creating feedback loops throughout the system helps educators learn from various forms of data and adapt their practice in light of new information, practices essential for educators to understand (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Detailed examples of the type of feedback present within such systems and the role such feedback plays in the modification of practice, however, are not prevalent in the literature. Harris and Lambert (2003) note that

...a typical missing part in contemporary reform effort is communication and feedback systems. These “feedback loops” are important to monitor development and inform others about progress. Information needs to be accumulated and reinterpreted as it moves through the school. It is essential that informed conversations take place about things that are happening in the school, how people are thinking and feeling about them, what ideas are occurring to them, and what meanings are emerging.... Information will come to teachers in both formal (data and evidence) and informal (feedback loop conversations) ways. Consequently, opportunities to discuss and reflect are imperative if progress is to be made. (p. 33)

This study, aimed squarely at examining the role of feedback both prior to and after involvement in a professional learning community and the ways in which educators modify their practice in light of the formal and informal feedback loops PLC structures provide, seeks to describe this aspect of educator practice about which little is presently known. By doing so it adds to the literature, building a detailed description of teacher work and exploring the impact of involvement in a professional learning community on the work which teachers and administrators

undertake. As a result it identifies some of the best practices to use when giving, receiving and implementing feedback structures within a professional learning community.

Definition of Terms

Collaboration – working together interdependently in systemic processes to analyze and impact professional practice aimed at improving individual and collective results (DuFour, DuFour & Eakers, 2008).

Collaborative Team – a group of people working together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which they are mutually accountable (DuFour et al., 2008). Here the term refers to the administrator and PLC team members under study.

Collective Capacity – the coproduced strength within a system which is a result of the shared talents, work and focus of all of its members centered on addressing critical educational tasks (Fullan, 2010a).

Dialogue – an ongoing communication between individuals and groups premised on the idea that learning is both individual and social in nature; such communication is intended to create an ongoing process of learning and knowing (Freire, 2009; Allen, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

Feedback – any information, whether from an outside source or personal and reflective in nature, which is used by an individual or group to move toward set goals, further an individual's or group's metacognitive awareness, and consider what resources may be needed and how practice might be modified. Here feedback is broadly defined to include paired and group dialogues, individual and group reflections, student responses to instruction and assessment, the spoken and written communication of the educator, students, parents, peers and administrators, and formal and informal reporting structures (Schön, 1987; DuFour et al., 2008; Senge et al., 2000).

Feedback Loops – both formal and informal structures within a system which engage individuals and groups in the repeated act of presenting information, considering feedback and acting in light of an increased or heightened awareness (Harris & Lambert, 2003).

Information – data which is assigned meaning by an individual or organization and which ultimately is used to create changes in various “formations” in the system, namely in individual actions and group structures (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

Interdependence – a working relationship within a group in which each member contributes their individual strengths to group goals and relies on the support of others to overcome weaknesses of practice (DuFour et al., 2008).

Professional Learning Community – a group of educators who believe that improved student learning is a result of continuous job-embedded learning for educators and who are therefore committed to working collaboratively in a continual process of collective inquiry and action research so as to improve student results (DuFour et al., 2008).

Reciprocal Accountability – a relationship where, when an individual educator is held responsible for an action or outcome, others bear the responsibility of providing resources and assisting in building capacity so that the goal can be attained (Elmore, 2004).

Teaching and Learning System – a systemic arrangement of structures focused on ensuring students routinely learn from well-prepared teachers; teachers and administrators work together to create high-quality curriculum, appropriate materials and assessments, and engage in continuous reflection so as to learn and improve (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Assumptions and Limitations

As a former high school English educator of nine years, as a researcher who has previously conducted research on interdisciplinary teacher teams, and as a former university

instructor to some of the high school English teachers under study I entered into this research project with a number of personal experiences and viewpoints which must be openly bracketed.

As a former high school English educator who had the opportunity to work closely with both his English and grade-level colleagues, I believe strongly in the need for and value of collaborative dialogue as a way of improving classroom practice. The opportunities that I had to work collectively with my colleagues led to the creation of common English assessments and the creation of multiple common rubrics for reading, writing and oral performances which were applied in multiple disciplines at the 9th grade level. Having had such prior experiences myself, exploring how the administrators and English educators in this study work together and modify their practice in light of various professional learning community experiences and structures was a natural continuation of my personal experiences and professional interests.

In addition, I have had past experiences with some of the participants which must also be disclosed. As a result of my role as a Methods of Composition instructor at a university in the center of the state of Wisconsin graduates of the English Education program in which I teach are scattered throughout the surrounding area; the school under study, located in central Wisconsin, contains three teachers who are my former students. I have, over time, maintained professional relationships with these former graduates, offering advice on coursework or how to address the teaching of certain content in their practice; as a researcher interested in the role of feedback and ways in which education can be improved through collaborative practices this continued dialogue should come as no surprise to the reader. Although only a handful of former graduates were involved as participants in the study I entered into this research eager to discuss their experiences and the ways in which they'd modified practice in light of the feedback of others.

The teachers and administrators represented in this study, it is assumed, have provided honest information during both the individual interviews and focus group discussion; cognizant of

the previous relationships which exist between the researcher and some participants, the scripts shared at the beginning of each discussion reminded participants to openly and honestly explore and share their experiences, regardless of how they thought responses might be viewed by others including the researcher. Therefore although previous professional relationships existed between some participants and the researcher, the information gathered was assumed to be reflective of participants' experiences as both individual educators and administrators and as members of the PLC team. Some participants may have found it difficult to describe the phenomenon of working in a professional learning community and negative elements of their work may have surfaced; such difficulties were expected. For all of these reasons steps were taken to build trust and rapport prior to the collection of data. Member-checking was also used to ensure that the reported results accurately represent participants' views and intents.

Certain limitations are also inherent in the design of this study. The teachers and administrators represented in the study are from a single high school in central Wisconsin. The results are therefore highly contextualized. It should not be assumed that the school, teachers and administrators in this study are representative of all high schools throughout the state of Wisconsin. Instead, this study is limited to the particular individuals and circumstances outlined here-in and to the ways in which unique and individual participants responded to and were capable of describing the phenomenon. In addition, although the school under study used an approach to professional learning community which adhered to the essential components outlined by DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006), the work which they undertook and the ways in which feedback structures were organized were similarly highly contextual. While fitting the PLC definition, the work of the educators and administrators included in this study is not representative of all PLC structures throughout the state or nation.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to detail the lived experiences of high school teachers and administrators prior to becoming a part of a professional learning community model and to describe their experiences as they gave, received, reflected and acted upon feedback made available in their PLC system. Data were collected using individual interviews and a focus group to explore the lived experiences of each participant.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of this study is divided into chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of the current literature and utilizes an approach which contextualizes professional learning communities by identifying their place in the macro view of professional development before continually moving toward micro-level understandings of PLCs and the role which feedback plays in such systems. Examined themes include: (a) the role of professional development in education, (b) essential concepts relevant to professional learning communities and the work in which PLCs engage, (c) the ways in which professional learning communities revision learning through a systemic lens, (d) the qualities of effective feedback systems in PLCs, and (e) the need to understand the impact of various informal and formal feedback loops within professional learning communities on teacher and administrator practice.

Chapter 3 delineates the methodology chosen to complete this study. Based in qualitative research, the study employs a phenomenological approach to detail the lived experiences of participants. The third chapter provides specifications for the conduct of interviews, validation and analysis processes. Procedures detailing the collection, transcription and storage of data are included. Considerations for conducting research on human subjects are discussed. The chapter concludes with a description of the research setting and an overview of the study's participants.

Chapter 4 presents a description of the history of professional learning communities in the local context. The study's findings are analyzed and presented. The data collected is synthesized into five major themes. Each theme is then discussed within the context of the current literature.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study's findings and highlights the connections between the research questions and the study's major themes. The implications of the study are discussed for teachers, administrators and district policy makers. Potential areas of future research which others might pursue are also identified.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

A general consensus exists in the literature about the type of professional development in which schools should engage, the purposes and benefits of developing professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools and school systems and the ways in which teachers and administrators can engage in and support such work. However at present there are few descriptions and a limited understanding of the very specific and human ways in which educational systems use instructional data and establish meaningful feedback loops, specifically those which impact personal practice. It is essential that the field of education and those engaged in PLC work understand the ways in which teachers formally and informally provide and receive feedback, the impact that various feedback loops have on their practice, and the ways in which best practices in providing feedback can be disseminated to make PLC work most effective. **The**

Role of Professional Development

The experience of many teachers throughout the United States is one of isolation from the practice of others, a system based on an outdated approach to education and antithetical to professional growth. Conceived in the Industrial Revolution, much of the workings of modern schools remain unchanged, predicated on mechanistic metaphors which reduce teachers to the level of individual cogs in the great machine fit for doing precise and isolated teaching tasks. Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that “U.S. teachers... work in isolation... with little time to plan [or] share their knowledge. In the factory conception of the school... there is little need for professional expertise or teacher collaboration to develop curriculum and solve problems of practice” (p. 62); such isolation describes the present state of most U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Elmore, 2004; DuFour, DuFour & Eakers, 2008; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009).

U.S. educators conduct their work as best as they're able, though their present isolation by school structures is detrimental to school improvement. Barth (2006) calls such a system one of "parallel play" in which educators work

...in close proximity... [but] each is so self-absorbed, so totally engrossed in what [they] are doing, that the two of them will go on for hours working in isolation.... The abiding signature of parallel play in education is the self-contained classroom.... The cost of concealing what we do is isolation from colleagues who might cause us to examine and improve our practices. (p. 10)

Identifying such practices as "fundamentally incompatible with the practice of improvement," Elmore (2004) suggests that isolation is problematic because it "provides almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting in which they work.... [a structural disconnect which] is fatal to any sustained process for instructional improvement" (p. 127). Continuing to reinforce practice which separates educators will only continue to replicate a "culture of privacy and non-interference [that] is the best friend of the status quo," structures which must be reconsidered (Schmoker, 2006, p. 14).

If the current *status quo* of teacher isolationism is to change attitudes by some, which equate professional development to wasted time away from the real work in classrooms, need to be revised and instead come to see such work as an essential component of instructional improvement. Helping teachers learn to improve their practice is the real work that must be done. Often the traditional approach to professional development through evening or summer classes or short in-service opportunities is, in fact, wasted time; that is it is ever-changing, decontextualized and of insufficient quantity to impact the practice of teachers (Elmore, 2004). As Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) note, although professional development is a yearly requirement for most educators, "few have the chance to study any aspect of teaching for more than a day or two. And

fewer than half are involved in any kind of mentoring, coaching, or collaborative research” (p. 204). Increased time and more frequent opportunities to improving *teaching* must be at the heart of professional development.

Educators in the United States are, in general, provided with less time for and fewer opportunities for professional development than their international counterparts; time for teaching staff to meet and collaborate must be a frequent part of a system’s culture to achieve success. In a synthesis of nine studies Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley (2007) found that if there are 14 hours or less of professional development available the work will have no impact on student performance. When 14 or more hours of focused professional development were available students showed significant positive growth, and larger effects were found in programs which offered 30-100 hours of professional development over a 6-12 month period.

High-achieving nations and U.S. school districts have realized the importance of allocating substantial time to professional development. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) suggest that the United States is far behind in creating extended and collaborative learning experiences for educators which “allow teachers to work together on issues of instructional planning, learn from one another..., conduct research on the outcomes of classroom practices, and collectively guide curriculum, assessment, and professional learning decisions” (p. 6). Such an approach is sharply contrasted by the 100 hours of professional development provided to teachers in Singapore, one of the highest PISA-rated educational systems in the world (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Substantial time focused on collaborative practice is vital to successful professional development.

Simply increasing the amount of professional development will do little, however, if it is not the right kind of professional development. In an analysis of the data from the National Staff Development Council’s 2007-2009 Standards Assessment Inventory for four states (Arizona, Georgia, Kansas and Missouri), even in situations where whole-staff meetings were frequent,

...opportunities to observe each others' classroom instruction and to provide feedback to one another were less common: only 40 percent of teachers frequently observed each other, only 55 percent had time set aside to discuss what they learned from professional development experiences, and only 57 percent had frequent opportunities to give each other feedback. [Similar patterns existed in 2002-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey], in which teachers reported little cooperative effort and coordination among teachers in their schools. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 25)

Providing substantial time for professional development is meaningless, therefore, if it is not focused on work directly applicable to the unique teaching situations of individual teachers.

Unfortunately, much professional development in the United States has been, and for many continues to be, one of engaging in activities that are abstract, disjointed, divorced from real classroom practice and that shift from one focus to the next from session to session and year to year. Traditional professional development, as Curry and Killion (2009) note, transpired during the summer through university or district coursework, and in after-school workshops or days set aside for building or district inservices. Such traditional professional development included “content determined by someone other than the teacher... occurred outside of school... [contained] no requirement for implementation of the learning... [offered] limited follow-up support... [and was] disconnected from ongoing classroom practice” (Curry & Killion, 2009, p. 58). Professional development, when so delivered, frustrates teachers who often find the activities to be disconnected and irrelevant to their daily teaching practice (Curry & Killion, 2009).

To be meaningful, professional development must impact classroom practices and thus needs to be immediately applicable to the teaching situations which educators face. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) note, “Professional development should focus on student learning and address the teaching of specific curriculum content” (p. 10). Such an approach is referred to as

“reform-oriented professional development” by Curry & Killion (2009) seeing as the intent is to directly relate to and reform teacher practice. Unlike traditional professional development, reform-oriented approaches are ongoing, engage teachers within the same school, focus on the content teachers teach, are inquiry-oriented and address student performance in the local context. Reform-oriented professional development aims to link “teacher learning to teacher practice and student learning... provides support to transfer learning to practice” and measure success based on student results (Curry & Killion, 2009, p. 58). It is therefore essential that professional development relates to the specific curriculum and contexts within which educators work. Such professional development “is most effective when it addresses the concrete, everyday challenges involved in teaching and learning specific academic subject matter, rather than focusing on abstract educational principles or teaching methods taken out of context” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 10). Reform-oriented professional development linked to teacher practice engages educators and improves the implementation of teacher learning; increased implementation impacts student learning (Curry & Killion, 2009, p. 58).

It is important to note that such professional development must therefore be linked to the implemented curriculum, that is to say the curriculum as it is taught, not as it is written in official curriculum guides which are often the exact *abstract educational principals* which Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) describe. Oberg (2008) suggests that

Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or... curriculum guides [guarantees a] common curriculum. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the intended curriculum, often pay little attention to the implemented curriculum... [and] even less attention is given to the attained curriculum.... (pp. 31-32)

Professional development must focus on what is actually taught, not far-removed guidelines.

What is more, such work is strengthened when colleagues collaborate so as to collectively improve their practice. No longer isolated, educators need opportunities to observe and collaborate with colleagues engaged in similar tasks and with similar students. As Barber and Mourshed (2007) indicate “Individual teachers need to gain understanding of specific best practices. In general, this can only be achieved through the demonstration of such practices in an authentic setting” (p. 27). Such work is mutually beneficial.

Collaborative professional development opens once private teaching practice for discussion and exploration with colleagues so that all members might potentially benefit and reconsider their instructional practices in light of new information. Such collaborative dialogues should occur regularly and be clearly structured. By sharing goals, strategies, and materials and by openly addressing questions, concerns and the results of their practice teachers benefit both individually and collectively (DuFour, 2004). Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) note that “Research suggests... successful new models of schooling require strong teaching faculties who work in organizational structures that create more coherence and a ‘communal’ orientation” (p. 65). Such structures reduce isolation and promote school change, work which assists “in building the capacity of teachers to improve their instructional practice and the capacity of school systems to promote teacher learning” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 7). It is precisely this type of professional development which is needed if whole schools and educational systems are to help every teacher and every student learn. In the end, “In [educational] systems that go, strategies focus on and drill down to the effective instructional practices so that *all* teachers, individually and collectively, become better at what they are doing while they continue to seek better methods” (Fullan, 2010a, p. 6; emphasis in original).

The inadequate and disjointed professional development offered in much of the United States must be replaced with work which research suggests is the most effective: frequent

opportunities to collaborate on local curriculum and classroom practice through a shared dialogue which reduces isolated practice and supports shared efforts to improve instruction. In sum, “To avoid disparities between what teachers learn in professional development work and what they can actually implement in their classrooms, schools should seamlessly link curriculum, assessment, standards, and professional learning opportunities” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 48). Such professional development is desperately needed throughout the United States.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities have been offered as one model which can be used to realize meaningful professional development. Though each PLC arrangement is unique, at their core professional learning communities are built on the concept that improved student learning is a result of continuous teacher learning; such improvements are made possible through continuous and collaborative action research focused on improving student results (DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many, 2006). PLC structures facilitate such learning by reducing isolation and, according to Hargreaves, “by bringing teachers together to talk about how they can improve the learning of all students as they challenge and question each other’s practice in spirited but optimistic ways” (Sparks, 2004, p. 48). Such changes do not simply happen, however, because they have been mandated by educational leaders or policy makers. As Harris (2011) suggests,

Changing what people do in their daily work involves much more than being told to do something different, therefore the PLC model is a way of ensuring that there is the opportunity to learn new practices and to generate new knowledge. The PLC work is a way of putting professionals at the heart of the reform process by giving them a platform to instigate and manage change” (p. 167).

As structures change educators have frequent opportunities to engage each other in issues of practice in meaningful and sustained ways. Based on the work of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) Harris (2011) notes,

The best PLCs do not just interpret spreadsheets, deliver measurable results, or complete assigned tasks in hastily convened teams. Instead, they are committed to transforming learning and assuming responsibility for results, valuing each other as people in relationships of care, respect, and challenge, and using quantifiable evidence and shared experience to inquire into teaching and learning issues making judgments about ways to improve. (p. 168)

As systems create long-term structures aimed at enhancing teacher learning the professional contexts in which educators work begin to change. As Hargreaves notes,

Our work has demonstrated that a professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school's operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before – for instance, how time is used, the grouping of students, the participation of all teachers on learning teams, and the use of technology to improve staff communication and collaboration. (Sparks, 2004, p. 48)

Although each PLC arrangement is unique there is overlap in their most common features.

Essential concepts. Although discussions of PLCs are frequent in the literature, DuFour et al. (2008) argue that “the term is now used so ubiquitously to describe any loose grouping of educators that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (p. 14). The definition used by DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006) qualifies professional learning communities as

...educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

Professional learning communities support exactly the type of professional development which the literature suggests is key to productive and lasting educational improvement.

In PLCs the fundamental purpose of a school “is to ensure all students learn at high levels” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 18). Successful professional learning communities therefore adopt the attitude that student success hinges on the choices educators make and the ways in which they collectively support student learning. Under such circumstances isolating structures are seen as an impediment to learning; therefore educators in PLCs instead “work together interdependently and assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students... [and are] hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 18). These key PLC concepts are reiterated throughout the literature (see Schmoker, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2011; DuFour et al., 2008; Murzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2010; Fullan, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Kanold, Toncheff & Douglass, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond 2010).

Understanding that the quality and consistency of education available to all students will not improve if educators do not continue to learn about their practice, PLCs utilize “*collaboration* [as] a systemic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and *impact* professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team, and their school” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 16; emphasis in original).

Creating high expectations and rigorous curriculum for all. A critical and collaborative examination of practice leads the members of professional learning communities to hold high expectations for all students and feel a shared responsibility to help all learners succeed

in a challenging educational environment. Schools functioning as PLCs, DuFour et al. (2008) note, “embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and [as the] fundamental responsibility” of their daily work (p. 15). As a result educators in PLCs frequently experience an increased sense of moral purpose and collective responsibility for all students. Leaving no child behind is a daily call to action, not a distant abstraction or political slogan, and creates schools that believe “[high] expectations for all... are realistic (if only you believe and do something about it)” (Fullan, 2010a, p. 62).

Ensuring that students have access to teachers who are continually committed to learning and to a curriculum which asks the best of them is the central work of PLCs. Research suggests that teacher and curriculum quality play the largest role in student achievement and that “when students of similar backgrounds and initial achievement levels are exposed to more and less challenging curriculum materials, those given the richer, more demanding curriculum opportunities ultimately outperform those placed in less challenging classes” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 54). Educators working in professional learning communities focus not only on teaching central concepts but also on ensuring that all students master the necessary skills, learning from and adjusting their instruction to better reach their students. They take collective responsibility for such work through a gathering of evidence, a development and implementation of strategies, an analysis of the effectiveness of the implemented changes and their impact on student learning, and an application of this new knowledge in the next round of continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2008).

A focus on teacher learning to improve instructional capacity. Professional learning communities are effective because they address the most powerful variable in education: the quality of interactions between teachers and learners. The quality of the teacher, Sanders and Rivers (1996) suggest, is the main variable in student learning, and PLCs make learning how to

improve teaching capacity the lynchpin of their educational system. Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that “The more expert and experienced teachers there are in a school, the more professional knowledge they can share and bring to bear on making good curriculum decisions... [thereby improving] the cumulative effects of good teaching” (pp. 49-50). Research suggests that “students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low-performing teachers” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 12). What is more, repeated exposure to experienced or inexperienced educators has cumulative effects. Having three ineffective as opposed to highly effective teachers in a row, for instance might, according to Rivers and Sanders (1996), account for “differences in student achievement of 50 percentile points.” This is often the difference between not graduating from high school and being accepted to a competitive college or university (Darling-Hammond, 2010). PLCs work to ensure that *all* students have access to quality educators who are constantly improving their practice so that *all* students benefit from year to year and over time.

Revisoning the Work of Teachers and Administrators in PLCs Through a Systems Lens

Understanding the importance of ensuring that all students learn under the tutelage of high-quality educators, professional learning communities adopt a view of education which embraces a systems perspective, revising the ways in which teachers work and the conditions under which professional development takes place. As Wheatley (2006) suggests, we need “less reverence for the objects we create, and... more attention to the processes we use to create them. Healthy processes create better relationships among us, more clarity about who we are, and more information about what’s going on around us” (p. 155). Effective professional learning communities consider the systemic influences present in their work and revision the processes they use. Successful systems engage educators in professional development centered on specific

goals and clearly define the evidence necessary to demonstrate instructional effectiveness, thereby focusing the entire system on continuous learning (Guskey & Yoon, 2009)..

Systemic work and structures to improve collective instructional capacity.

Understanding the collective effort needed to emphasize continual teacher learning, some PLCs take a systems approach to professional development, adapting practice and structures in ways which enhance the overall capacity of the educational systems which employ them. As Barber and Mourshed (2007) note, “The quality of the outcomes for any school system is essentially the sum of the quality of the instruction that its teachers deliver” (p. 26). Professional learning communities, therefore, put teacher and student learning and improved educator practice at the center of their work. To this end PLCs seek to break down isolation throughout the system, whether it be within a department or building or throughout a school district, thereby increasing communication and providing educators with additional opportunities to create system-wide consistency. As Senge et al. (2000) suggest,

All too often there is little communication across grade levels and across content areas. A child gets an experience in one year that might not relate to the next year’s experience.... If you’re a systems thinker in school planning, then you focus not on particular practices but on building collaborative relationships and structures for change. You need mechanisms and a process that allow people to talk, across grade levels, departments, and schools within a system about how they want kids to develop and what supports they need. (p. 394)

PLCs address the far too often overlooked issue of building collective capacity which is, according to Fullan (2010a),

...the one thing you should remember.... The big collective capacity and the one that ultimately counts [most] is when they get better conjointly – collective, collaborative

capacity, if you like. Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching. (p. xiii)

Darling-Hammond (2010) stresses that although innovation abounds in American education, “*systems that proactively construct the conditions under which high-quality teaching and schooling can be widely available*” are far more rare (p. 162; emphasis in original). Systems which employ true professional learning communities break down isolation and create the system-wide collaborative relationships necessary to ensure that high-quality instruction is available to all students.

Employing adaptive, not technical, solutions. As systems create spaces for educators to collaboratively explore practice and learn in context they move away from stock technical solutions and instead implement adaptive solutions which call upon their collective creative powers and analyzing feedback from contextual sources. Technical off-the-shelf solutions and programs have limited effectiveness. Educators in professional learning communities must move beyond implementing such rigidly designed programs and instead engage in the difficult work of action research to address adaptive challenges which Fullan (2005) describes as challenges “[to] which we do not have the answers” (p. 53) including how to engage students, involve parents and the community or improve a skill-set from 75% to 90% proficiency.

Confronting such challenges requires the full engagement of educators in revised systems focused on learning and developing collective capacity. As Heifetz (2004) notes, “the person with the problem is the problem, and the solution” (as cited in Fullan, 2005, p. 53). In similar fashion Fullan (2005) himself suggests that “adaptive challenges require the deep participation of the people with the problem” (p. 53). Elmore (2004) adds that continued attention to adaptive solutions and attention to learning, not innate teaching abilities present in a select few

educators, is what improves quality system-wide. The key to school improvement is “more a function of *learning to do the right things* in the setting where you work than it is of what you know when you start to do the work” (Elmore, 2004, p. 73; emphasis in original).

In such cases educational systems apply adaptive solutions “to ensure that educators collaborate, or co-labor, on the ‘right’ things – the things that actually impact student learning” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 183). Educators in professional learning communities need to embrace the collaborative and adaptive work continually before them: the creation of a core curriculum, the identification of curricular fence posts, the development and shared administration and scoring of relevant formative and summative assessments and an analysis of this data and its impact on future instruction. Teachers in such systems have indicated an increased ability to understand student learning, discuss the desired qualities of student work and effectively teach students how to meet expectations (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As PLCs come to realize that they, not a technical program, are both the *problem* and the *solution* they

...follow a cycle of continuous improvement that begins with examining student data to determine the areas of greatest student need, pinpointing areas where additional educator learning is necessary, identifying and creating learning experiences to address these adult needs, developing powerful lessons and assessments, applying new strategies in the classroom, refining new learning into more powerful lessons and assessments, reflecting on the impact on student learning, and repeating the cycle with new goals. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 3)

Leaving behind the autocratic, prescriptive and decontextualized approaches found in struggling schools, successful professional learning communities engage in highly individualized, active, creative, self-regulated and focused development centered on building capacity throughout the system (Harris & Lambert, 2003). Engaging in such work helps systems move “from enforcing

procedures to building capacity [and] from managing compliance to managing improvement” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 270). Such systemic changes are, although seemingly complex, rather quite simple and consist of finding quality educators and providing them with time and space to discuss, create and implement a better curriculum (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). PLCs create such spaces, bring educators together in systemic ways to address problems and create adaptive solutions to ever-changing instructional dilemmas.

The benefits of addressing teaching and assessment through systemic processes.

Such systemic shifts necessitate continual professional dialogue so as to arrive at a set of unified goals, assessments, and expectations for students. Such standardization of curricular expectations avoids the external interference and pressure so often enforced by outside mandates and instead supports contextualized, localized and shared benchmarks and control (Oberg, 2008; Schmoker, 2011). Indeed, with a focus on universal student success, professional learning communities must be keenly aware of the content students are being taught and know precisely how student learning will be measured. To this end Schmoker (2011) suggests that all educational reforms focus on “a common curriculum, sound lessons, and authentic literacy” and that these three elements should be approached with “‘simplicity and diligence’ until they are satisfactorily understood and implemented” throughout the school system (p. 9). Successful professional learning communities focus on what is taught and guarantee that it is taught to a “sufficient intellectual depth”, enhance their awareness of whether students are actually learning material before moving on to future concepts, and modify their practice accordingly, ensuring that students build a more complete and critical understanding of the discipline (Schmoker, 2011, pp. 10-11). Numerous studies suggest that when teachers collaboratively “define precisely which concepts and skills they want students to learn, and... identify the content that is most likely to give students trouble,” teacher practice and student outcomes improve (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 10). What is more, Schmoker

(2011) suggests that such work “*benefit[s] immeasurably when teachers work in teams – that is, in true ‘professional learning communities’ where curriculum and lessons are continuously developed, tested, and refined on the basis of assessment results* (DuFour, DuFour, Eakers & Many, 2006; Schmoker, 2006)” (p. 11; emphasis in original). Educational systems should therefore arrange frequent opportunities for educators to discuss, arrive at, implement and assess highly focused core content.

As the content to be taught solidifies, educators must continue to develop adaptive solutions by both creating and scoring shared assessments, work which establishes a consistent level of proficiency for all students throughout the system. Assessment, as defined by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) is “the act of determining the extent to which the desired results are on the way to being achieved and to what extent they have been achieved” (p. 6). Such assessment, intended to gauge instructional effectiveness and students’ levels of concept mastery, is largely formative in nature and must support student learning. Assessments that support learning, according to the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment (2001), must contain a “modest number of curricular aims; clear, concise descriptions of each curricular aim; [and] instructionally useful reports that help teachers and students alike understand areas of strengths and weaknesses in a student’s learning” (DuFour et al., 2008, pp. 40-41). Systemic structures which support clarification of aims and development and assessment of common student work should thus be highly valued. DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2010) write that “one of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning... is the creation of frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments by teachers who [work collaboratively] to help... students develop the agreed-upon knowledge and skills” (p. 75); they suggest that opting out of the creation of such assessments should not be permitted because of the power of such work.

Developing ways in which PLC teams can collectively score and reflect upon such common assessments is similarly important, thus improving the overall consistency of expectations and their understanding of the effectiveness of their instruction. Studies indicate that it is useful for teachers to collaboratively analyze and discuss student work so as to “identify students’ most common errors and misunderstandings, reach common understanding of what it means for students to master a given concept or skill, and find out which instructional strategies are or are not working, and for whom” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 228).

Furthermore, conversations which help clarify expectations throughout the system are needed as teachers collectively examine and score shared assessments. Using various tuning protocols, educators can share examples of student work and receive feedback on the quality of the student response (Blythe, Allen & Schiffelin, 2007). Additional work should seek to improve inter-rater reliability so that multiple educators come to score a single assessment in a consistent way, thus creating a shared expectation for student work regardless of the instructor (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Reeves (2004) suggests that such work improves consistency, provides accurate and specific feedback to both students and teachers, and ultimately leads educators to accept increased responsibility for student results. As Oberg (2008) notes, “Common, teacher-made formative assessment, as a component of the feedback loop process, is the best practice in assessment and the gold standard in educational accountability” (p. 45). Such work resonates with teachers and integrates meaningful feedback into educational systems.

Integrating systemic supports for such work is therefore essential in creating professional learning communities, and has been shown to provide numerous benefits. For example, studies find educators who have had shared scoring opportunities “felt they became smarter about student learning and about how to teach effectively as they examined student work and thinking directly and talked with their colleagues about what constitutes good work and how to produce it”

(Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 69). Such learning holds the potential to improve individual teaching capacity and ripples throughout the system.

Collaborative assessment holds high promise for promoting genuine change in how teachers regard student work and use that assessment for learning. When teachers work together to establish criteria for judging students' work, set standards, and make group decisions, the collaboration has many spin-offs.... They tend to enhance one another's understanding of instruction and curriculum, develop agreement about the nature and quality of the instruments and approaches for assessing their students' work, challenge and question their own expectations for students, and develop more confidence in their decisions and in their accountability to the outside community (Earl and LeMahieu, 1997, p. 166). (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, pp. 210-211)

Supporting such collaborative structures within departments, grade levels and throughout schools and districts has been shown to shift teachers' focus from a concern for covering material to a concern for adapting practice to improve student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) and an increased "desire to continuously develop more effective practices..." (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 229).

As such work occurs throughout the system improved teacher learning increases the quality of interactions between individual students and teachers and results in increased student achievement. Engaged in a continually collaborative and reflective cycle of teaching and examining student work, teachers gain an improved understanding of each student and adjust practice in light of relevant student data. Shared scoring of common formative assessments allows individual educators to compare how their students performed on a specific skill as compared to other students, and affords teachers opportunities to reflect on discrepancies with the support of colleagues. When involved in such collaborative work the team ultimately benefits as the

combined thoughts, strategies and talents of the group are engaged, prompting educators to reflect on data and modify instruction (DuFour, 2004). Successful systems support such collaborative efforts, opening access to sources of relevant and contextualized feedback and data to improve instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

When given the opportunity to examine meaningful data on shared common assessments teachers and schools begin to do themselves what they require of their students: learn. Successful professional learning communities focus teachers on ways to establish clear goals, effectively monitor student progress and modify instruction in light of collected data. DuFour et al. (2008) summarize the current situation perfectly:

The message is consistent and clear. The best professional development occurs in a social and collaborative setting rather than in isolation, is ongoing and sustained rather than infrequent and transitory, is job-embedded rather than external, occurs in the context of the real work of the school and classroom rather than in off-site workshops or courses, focuses on results (that is, evidence of improved student learning) rather than activities or perceptions, and is systematically aligned with school and district goals rather than random. (pp. 369-370)

Such systems are far and few between in the American educational system; as Schmoker (2005a) writes, “This image – of the true professional learning community – has yet to become the norm in most schools, despite [their being] almost no dissenting entities on this issue...” (p. xiv). The professional learning community model, however, holds tremendous potential to improve and sustain both teacher and student learning (Schmoker, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2011; DuFour et al., 2008; Murzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2010; Fullan, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Kanold, Toncheff & Douglass, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond 2010).

Providing regular and structured opportunities for educators to create, share and reflect upon the implemented curriculum ultimately changes the way in which educators see themselves, their work, and the purpose and identity of their educational system. The result is a systems identity continually focused on improving instruction. Gardner (2008) notes that too often systems do not consider the qualities they would like to see individuals exhibit, “nor do [they] ponder how to nurture workers who will not simply pursue their self-interest but will realize the core mission of their calling...” (p. 18). Collaborative professional development which reduces isolation and instills a shared responsibility for learning throughout the organization leads to a staff with a collective identity and, “[o]nce this identity is set in motion, it becomes the sense-making process of the organization. In deciding what to do, a system will refer back to its sense of self.... [E]verything we know is determined by who we think we are” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, Identity section, para. 1). In a previous review of the literature Darling-Hammond (2010) found that having regular and substantial opportunities to discuss, implement, review, score and reflect upon their teaching context and the work being done helps to create successful schools where there is a “greater consistency in [instruction], more willingness to share [practice] and try new ways of teaching, and more success in solving problems of practice” (p. 228). Implementing structures supportive of collaborative professional development and dedicated to continuous shared learning ultimately assists in developing a systems identity which actively and continually seeks adaptive ways to modify instruction and improve teacher and student learning.

Administrative revisioning of professional development and allocation of system resources. If professional learning communities are to become a successful model for educational systems the administrators who often oversee such work must assist in shifting the paradigm from a focus on teaching to an emphasis on learning. Fullan (2010a) reminds administrators that “Every policy, strategy, and action... should be designed and experienced in a way that

automatically and relentlessly reminds people every day that education reform is a matter of moral purpose of utmost importance to us individually and collectively” (p. 63). The ability to improve the educational experience between teachers and students is increased when administrators arrange systemic supports; “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on learning” (NCSL, 2006 as cited in Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 29).

Implementing and sustaining true professional learning communities cannot and will not be possible without clear administrative support at both the building and district levels, portions of the organization which have “an important role to play in providing the practical, technical and emotional support needed by schools” (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 205).

School administrators need to therefore support a shift, where appropriate, away from the outdated, isolated and disconnected “traditional” approach to professional development previously discussed, instead supporting a vision of professional learning communities which engage educators throughout the system in focused professional dialogue and development centered on their practice. The outdated model of “courses, workshops, or one-size-fits-all district-wide training [should be replaced by support for] the specific and timely learning needs of different collaborative teams [so as to] provide training team-by-team that is ‘just in time’ and ‘just what’s needed’” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003 as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 370). In essence, districts need to support the continual reflective practices of educators so that staff development is not a series of isolated events but is instead woven into the very daily fabric of the system (Hord & Sommers, 2008). The role of administrators, therefore, is to foster “New relationships [that] connect more and more of the system... [so that] as information circulates freely it creates new business and propels people into new relationships” and further learning (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, *The Dynamics of Self-Organization* section, para. 1). When possible this connected, collaborative and on-going vision of the

professional learning communities needs to be embraced by school administrators if the educational system is to change.

The ways in which administrators allocate resources likewise changes as structures are rearranged to create conditions supportive of continuous teacher and student learning. Their authority within a school or school system places principals “in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in their school.... School administrators set the stage and conditions for starting and sustaining the community development process (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006)” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 303). Acknowledging the importance influence they have within a school and school system, administrators need to advocate, nurture and sustain “a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and professional growth... responding to... interests and needs and mobilizing community resources” toward these ends (Interstate School Licensure Consortium, 1996, as cited in DuFour et. al, 2008, p. 306). Such a shift requires a revised view of how resources, especially time, are used to support learning.

As they come to embrace this new systemic view DuFour et al. (2008) suggest that principals see their purpose as creating “the conditions that help the adults in [their school] continually improve upon their collective capacity to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success” (p. 309). As administrators challenge their staffs and require such work, however, it behooves them to allocate resources in ways that help develop this capacity. Elmore (2004) calls such a relationship one of “reciprocal accountability” (p. 93) which calls upon administrators to simultaneously provide resources and develop each educator’s instructional capacity when they demand increases in teacher performance. Administrators must therefore allocate the resources at their disposal in such a way

that the collaborative and collective capacity of educators to reflect upon and learn from their practice is the relentless focus of all aspects of the system.

Administrators as insistent and consistent learning leaders. For such collaborative and all-inclusive professional learning to permeate a system, however, administrators must do more than arrange the environment and structures to support professional learning; they must insist, whenever possible, that teachers engage in collaborative work, attitudes and expectations which they should model in their own practice. For instance Jamie McCracken, the director of the Ottawa Catholic District, engaged his staff in collaborative work “by building their individual and collective capacity. This [work] was not invitational; it was presented as nonnegotiable. The system provided all kinds of support in terms of resources, coaches, data access, smart goals [and] time for job-embedded learning,” however all members of the district were required to participate in the professional learning taking place; removing oneself from the work of collectively learning was not an option (Fullan, 2010a, p. 51). Although the powers of individual administrators and their ability to influence and arrange structures, allocate resources and hold educators accountable for integrating collaborative work and modifying practice accordingly is highly situational, varying from building to building and within school districts, administrators should mold structures, practice and accountability in such ways whenever and however possible (Lambert, 2003; Harris & Lambert, 2003).

Under such circumstances it is crucial that administrators do not opt out of such processes but rather model exactly the type of learning they expect their staff to demonstrate. Elmore (2004) notes that

...if learning, individual[ly] and collective[ly], is the central responsibility of leaders, then they must be able to model the learning they expect of others. Leaders should be doing, and should be seen to be doing, that which they expect or require others to do. Likewise,

leaders should expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny as they exercise toward [their teachers]. (p. 67)

To support structures which create a true professional learning community, administrators must consequently prioritize learning as their central purpose as well.

Transitioning into a role as a learning leader is often a difficult though essential one for administrators. As one highly successful principal put it, “Being a principal is about helping adults to learn. That’s why it’s tough.... I walk the halls, walk the halls, and walk the halls.... I only look at my inbox after everybody else leaves” (Interview: Boston as cited in Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 31). Modeling behavior which consistently prioritizes teacher and student learning, although a challenge, is crucial in changing the identity of educational systems. “The role that principals play as they interact with teachers makes a profound impact on teacher behavior and student learning... (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. viii)” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 302); the expectation that continual learning is the central work of school systems must be expanded to include the work of students, teachers and administrators.

An administrative approach which distributes leadership and empowers individuals throughout the system. Although seemingly counterintuitive in the highly-structured hierarchies characteristic of so many schools, administrators in professional learning communities must distribute leadership throughout the system. Such an approach frees teachers and empowers them to take intelligent risks like those already described as they pursue improved learning and more effective instructional techniques. Creating professional learning communities necessitates helping educators see themselves as active and meaningful participants in the educational process, not beings who must obediently submit themselves to the knowledge of their betters. Relinquishing power without abdicating their responsibility for maintaining instructional learning is often difficult for administrators and likewise presents challenges to educators who have often

been marginalized or come to rely on the administration for direction. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) suggest that

Because dependency runs so deep in most organizations... employees often have to be encouraged to exercise initiative and explore new areas of competence. Not only do leaders have to let go and watch as employees figure out their own [adaptive] solutions, they also have to shore up their self-confidence and encourage them to do more. (Leaders in Self-Organizing Organizations section, para. 5)

If educators are to truly learn, administrators must support structures which reinforce teacher-directed learning. When faced with challenging circumstances the need to encourage educators to actively pursue their own solutions is all the more necessary. As Hargreaves notes, when prescriptive programs and mandates are forced upon teachers in struggling schools “the risk is that many will prefer [external “solutions” because they free teachers from] the difficulty and responsibility of exercising their own discretion [and thus become dependent] on an external system in which professional judgment is exercised by others” (Sparks, 2004, p. 49).

Empowering teachers and freeing them to create, implement, assess and revise their own solutions is critical of student learning is to improve.

In such ways administrators nurture a system which becomes self-sustaining, allowing teachers to be creative and utilize adaptive solutions as long as the educational learning needs of students and teachers are being met. Oberg (2008) notes that, although early on it might be more necessary for administrators to “model, suggest, and support [the work within individual PLC teams and make]... occasional suggestions or [ask for] clarification” (pp. 120-121) ultimately administrators must shift the power dynamics within a school. Such changes create other leaders so that the wealth of knowledge present in the system can be surfaced and brought to bear on student and teacher learning. “As a study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership

(Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004) concluded, ‘The goal of leadership development ultimately involves action not knowledge... [and helping people] to learn from their work rather than taking them away from their work to learn’ (p. 27)” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 312). Assuming the role of a true learning leader, one who distributes leadership throughout a system, is a difficult task and has far-reaching implications for educational systems. A complex revisioning of their role, embracing the position of a learning leader can be especially difficult in the hierarchical arrangements found in many schools. As Harris and Lambert (2003) note,

It is much more difficult to build leadership capacity among teachers than to tell teachers what to do. It is categorically more uncomfortable to be full partners with teachers engaged in development work than to dictate or supervise from the apex of the organization. (p. 38)

Empowering educators to act and to assume responsibility for those actions is a necessary step if true professional learning communities are to be created.

Distributing leadership does not diminish the importance of the administrator but rather establishes trust and strengthens the responsibility of the entire system for student learning. “The principal who is able to work as an equal and in a collaborative manner with teachers and staff... does not diminish his or her role,” Allen (1999) suggests; instead their role is deepened and they often come to be seen “as a facilitator-executive with commendable expertise who seeks to help” as is necessary (p. 59). In professional learning communities, therefore, administrators empower teachers to make individual and collaborative decisions and continually challenge the system as an ongoing part of the continual quest to improve instruction (Lambert, 2003; Sparks 2004). As Garvin and Roberts suggest, individuals “should be encouraged to ask questions of one another, to weigh the pros and cons of alternatives, [and] to advocate positions other than their own; such an approach militates against hierarchy and promotes buy-in” (as cited in Gardner, 2008, p. 117)

Such collaborative efforts strengthen the work of the entire system.

Furthermore, such a distributed approach to leadership ensures the continuation of teacher learning throughout a school or district even in the face of staffing changes. Such an approach populates the system with leaders who carry on the relentless focus on staff and student learning regardless of changes in hierarchical leadership. According to Harris and Lambert (2003), “School leadership needs to be a broad concept... [and] embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community” (p. 16). In sum, DuFour et al. (2008) note that principals in professional learning communities must “Be clear about their primary responsibility... disperse leadership throughout the school... [and] bring coherence to the complexities of schooling by aligning the structure *and* culture of the school with its core purpose” (p. 208; emphasis in original). Guiding and sustaining this work is an essential part of an administrator’s responsibilities if they are to create leaders throughout the system who continually engage others in the pursuit of improved teaching and learning.

Creating Effective Feedback Systems

As educators and administrators undertake such work it is therefore essential that school systems purposefully focus on creating environments and structures which encourage learning throughout the organization. As systems support collaboration and empower educators to generate new learning, it is therefore critical that schools implement supportive structures which maximize the sharing of data, encourage and capture the learning generated from critical feedback and support structures which make the collective learning of the system open and readily available to all members. Such feedback systems strengthen the work of professional learning communities.

Nurturing trusting relationships to promote open and honest feedback. Being freed by the system and empowered to act, educators must become comfortable in opening their practice to colleagues so that they ultimately can benefit from the constructive and honest feedback of their peers. Creating trusting relationships is therefore necessary to develop effective feedback loops in professional learning communities. John Goodlad (1983), among others, has noted that “Teaching must be taken out of its cloak of privacy and autonomy to become the business of the entire school and staff” (p. 557). For this to happen, however, teachers must trust those to whom they will bare their practice; this is no small challenge. Fear and distrust within organizations frequently inhibit individuals from transforming knowledge into action (Fullan, 2005).

Professional learning communities, therefore, need to be mindful of relationships and institute ways to scrutinize practice while ensuring that educators continually feel secure in sharing their experiences. As Barth (2006) notes,

A precondition for doing *anything* to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement... is possible. (p. 13; emphasis in original)

Generating trusting environments is therefore a necessary step in establishing learning communities so that meaningful feedback can enter into the system.

Trusting PLC environments encourage educators to share information and work collaboratively, generating new forms of feedback which assist them in questioning, connecting and taking individual and collective ownership of their practice. No longer isolated, individuals in learning organizations undergo, as Senge (1990) describes it,

...a shift of mind - from seeing [themselves] as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something “out there” to seeing how

[their] own actions create the problems [they] experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it. (p. 12)

To truly benefit from the collective knowledge and feedback of the PLC educators must make their thinking explicit and “engage in the difficult task of articulating and examining their assumptions” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 24), though such fundamental shifts are only possible where trust has been established. Although this work is difficult, it ultimately creates more productive and supportive learning environments. As Gardner (2008) writes, “It is evident that organizations and communities work more effectively when the individuals within them seek to understand one another (despite their differences), and to help one another, and to work together for common goals” (pp. 116-117). This is exactly the work being done in trusting PLCs.

As educators undertake such tasks trust builds and once dismissive or even adversarial attitudes are replaced by first congenial and finally truly collegial interactions; founded on shared trust and mutual respect their willingness to both share information and hold each other accountable for results deepens. Barth (2006) suggests that as relationships build the nature of the relationship changes. In addition to the isolated “parallel play” structure of working almost exclusively behind closed doors, educators are also often engaged in what Barth (2006) calls “adversarial relationships” which are not openly hostile but rather take place “in a more subtle way – by *withholding*.... [Educators often withhold] extraordinary insights about their practice— about discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership, and curriculum” (p. 10, emphasis in original). Barth (2006) suggests that rapid transformations within school systems are possible when educators simply stop *withholding* information about practice, a valuable form of instructional feedback.

Structures such as PLCs can, through the development of trusting relationships and a willingness to provide authentic and critical feedback, help form “congenial relationships [that] are personal and friendly” and ultimately result in the “collegial relationships” that Barth (2006) suggests schools strive for. System-wide collegial relationships, Barth notes, are the essence of professional learning communities: personal practice is exposed to the scrutiny of the group, educators receive feedback on their practice and the work of their students, and learning is supported throughout the organization.

Such regular and visible collegiality builds trust and makes the giving and receiving of feedback a regular and expected part of the educational system. When such omnipresent feedback and high expectations “[stare] you in the face through students and your peers working together to make lives and society better, [the commitment to improvement] is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible” (Fullan, 2010a, p.72). Professional learning communities contain regular and highly visible demonstrations of this trusting and open exchange of information and feedback. Barth (2006) writes that

Once the exchange of craft knowledge becomes institutionally sanctioned, educators no longer feel pretentious or in violation of a taboo by sharing their insights. A new taboo – *against withholding what we know* – replaces the old. Repeated practice soon embeds generous disclosure of craft knowledge into the culture of a school or a school system. (emphasis in original)

In summary, creating trusting, open and honest educational communities is a critical element in encouraging and facilitating the free exchange of information and promoting learning throughout a system. Barth (2006) stresses that his lifetime work in schools raises one incontrovertible finding:

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. (p. 9)

With empowered teachers sharing practice in regular, trusting and critical ways, successful PLCs seem to throw wide the doors of information available and create a system of continual and contextual feedback.

Focused and dialogical sharing of information. As educators build trusting relationships and engage in frequent conversations of practice and performance it is critical that these relationships, while congenial, remain focused on the learning to be done. Perkins (2003) notes that there is a “dark side of collaboration... [which he terms] *coblaboration*. The aim is to collaborate, but the result is blab that does not really pool the minds around the table” (p. 149; emphasis in original). Put another way, DuFour et al. (2008) write that “collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right issues” (p. 15). Engaged in the process of building trust and giving, analyzing, processing and responding to meaningful feedback, PLCs must continually keep learning, not the simplistic act of discussion, at the core of their learning organization.

Collaborative structures in PLCs are intended to help all teachers “become aware of specific weaknesses in their own practice” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 27); this work necessitates a shift away from friendly conversation and toward a true and open dialogue. Professional learning communities, therefore, provide structures and opportunities for educators to engage in dialogue about their practice and receive feedback and reconsider their decisions in

light of the thoughts and practices of others. Hord and Sommers (2008) make a clear distinction between *discussion* and *dialogue*, noting that in a *discussion* individuals try to dominate and win whereas participants are more interested in listening and learning when engaged in a *dialogue*. Successful PLCs focus dialogue on issues of student learning and achievement, drawing on the collective strengths of the learning team (Schmoker, 2011).

Unfolding in an open and trusting environment, regular opportunities to dialogue with colleagues help reduce isolation and generates feedback available through “access to the ideas, materials, strategies and talents” of their colleagues (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). The ability of educators to understand data is strengthened through structures which create regular sharing, listening and learning opportunities (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Ultimately regular opportunities for dialogue, when properly structured, create “professional *learning* communities [that] build shared knowledge and ensure that people are *learning* together by providing access to the same relevant and user-friendly information *before* asking them to make important decisions” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 129; emphasis in original). Learning to work in new ways requires teachers to take on new roles and communicate in differently and necessitates “asking questions, listening, and giving feedback” (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 31).

When collaborative dialogue is approached in this way the goals and purposes of the group are strengthened and solidified and teachers revise practice in light of the feedback they receive. Individuals invested in such work demonstrate “an unrelenting commitment to gather the facts and information necessary to make more informed and intelligent decisions, and to keep pace with new evidence and use the new facts to update practices” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 14). What is more, such dialogical processes have multiple benefits. Harris and Lambert (2003) suggest that dialogue results in a surfacing, clarifying and defining of values, beliefs and

assumptions, an active engagement of inquiry into teaching practice, a shared construction of meaning and knowledge, and the development and implementation of action plans.

In the end, such dialogical practices assist in changing the language which teachers use to discuss their own work as well as the work of the collective group. “Changes in behavior will require changes in discourse, or as Harvard researchers Kegan and Lahey (2001) put it, changing the way we talk can change the way we work” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 353). Kegan and Lahey (2001) note that such work moves dialogue from the language of complaint to commitment, blame to personal responsibility, New Year’s resolutions to competing commitments, big assumptions to assumptions collectively held, a need for prizes and praise to an ongoing regard, rules and policies to public agreement, and constructive criticism to deconstructive criticism. Creating spaces and processes for educators to engage in open dialogue about their educational practice is therefore an essential part of integrating meaningful feedback into educational systems.

Data as a result of shared educational endeavors. In addition to regular opportunities to dialogue, educators in PLCs receive valuable feedback as a result of their shared endeavors such as the setting and monitoring of common goals, the creation and scoring of shared curriculum, and the observation of each other’s practice. Bateson defines information as “a difference which makes a difference” and Beers notes that “information is that which changes us” (as cited in Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, Information section, para. 1). It is access to these wide-ranging forms of information that ultimately provide teachers with multiple forms of feedback to consider as they revise practice. Educators need learning communities where “information [is transformed] from being the *currency of exchange*... to being the *medium* of [the] organization [and something educators] can’t live without.... It has to be everywhere in the organization to sustain [it]” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, Information section, para. 3; emphasis in

original). The collaborative structures and shared endeavors present in PLCs make such diverse forms of feedback readily available.

Drawing from the variety of feedback available to them, educational systems should consistently reconsider data in light of their present and ever-changing endeavors and needs. Harris and Lambert (2003) note that access to information in a system should increase and be continually reinterpreted. They write:

It is essential that informed conversations take place about things that are happening in the school, how people are thinking and feeling about them, what ideas are occurring to them, and what meanings are emerging.... Information will come to teachers in both formal (data and evidence) and informal (feedback loop conversations) ways. Consequently, opportunities to discuss and reflect are imperative if progress is to be made. (p. 32)

Educators in PLCs should continually use their own work and the shared knowledge and efforts of the group to reflect upon, inform and reform their practice.

One such form of shared feedback comes from the creation, scoring and reflection upon shared curriculum and assessments. Shared formative assessments, for example, provide educators with valuable feedback on student performance and result in adaptation to future instruction since “a team of teachers is in a better position to identify strategies to resolve difficulties in student learning than a teacher who is working alone” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 208). Discussing such assessments provides individual teachers with useful feedback and opportunities to build shared expectations of student work, challenge their own practice and develop confidence in future instruction (Earl & LeMahieu, 1997). Feedback in the form of student work, dialogical conversations and individual reflection changes the ways in which educators think and leads to seeing common assessments “as a diagnostic tool to inform quality instruction and determine needs for student intervention” (Kanold, Toncheff & Douglas, 2008, p. 26).

In the end it is this open and shared reflection on practice that provides useful feedback to educators and results in a more informed and purposefully considered modification of classroom practice. Harris and Lambert (2003) write:

Authentic relationships are fostered by personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work and shared responsibilities. As individuals interact with each other, they tend to listen across boundaries – boundaries erected by disciplines, grade levels, expertise, authority, position, race and gender. . . . Trust is built and experienced within the context of multi-faceted communication systems. (p. 91)

Open and shared educational endeavors ultimately change practice. As Harris & Lambert (2003) note, “This is where improvement in the quality of the craft of teaching takes place – through hearing and considering feedback from other teachers” (p. 32).

Using data to adapt and fail intelligently. Successful systems are therefore not only those which look at various forms of formal and informal data as a means of providing and receiving feedback, but those that use the information to modify their instruction and fail intelligently, continually using data to improve their practice. Oberg (2008) suggests that “Data driven decision-making is about getting better information into the hands of classroom instructors” (p. 35); such information serves as feedback and assesses the successfulness of instruction. In the collaborative and dialogical PLC environment Reeves suggests that

“...teachers and school leaders can quickly evaluate the effectiveness of strategies, make mid-course corrections, express... hypotheses about what actions they might take... and within days or weeks, have additional evidence with which the new hypotheses can be tested.” (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 199)

Professional learning communities engage in a continual cycle of trying new approaches, using feedback data to test effectiveness, and then improve their future instruction.

Such cyclical feedback and implementation patterns help educators learn to fail intelligently so as to repeatedly improve instructional practice. Thomas Edison notes that “You must learn to fail intelligently. Failing is one of the greatest arts in the world. One fails forward towards success” (as cited in Fullan, 2005, p. 22). When confronted with data and feedback indicative of instructional failure and adversity, Kanter (2004) suggests that the “decision to... rally rather than get discouraged, involves seeing setbacks... as an opportunity to learn and move on. [For optimists] negative events are temporary glitches... [and] setbacks are due to specific causes that can be identified and fixed” (p. 357). Successful systems, therefore, use feedback to learn to fail intelligently, realizing that mistakes are inevitable and what is more important is the ability to learn from errors and modify future efforts as a result of having worked to understand previous mistakes (Kouzes & Posner, 2006).

Professional learning communities therefore learn to fail toward success. Barber and Mourshed (2007) ask educational systems to answer the key question, “How much focused, systemic research is conducted into effective instruction and then fed back into policy and classroom practice?” (p. 41). Successful PLCs respond that examining, reflecting upon and modifying practice as a result of feedback is a frequent part of their system and essential to continual improvement. Fullan (2005) nicely summarizes how systems in our data-driven society should respond to the feedback they receive. He suggests they

...drive out fear; set up a system of transparent data-gathering coupled with mechanisms for acting on the data; [and] make sure *all* levels of the system are expected to learn from their experiences. Deep learning is for students, teachers, schools, districts, and governments if sustainability is to have any chance. (p. 22)

The Need to Understand Various Forms of Feedback

Dedicated to the environments and activities which foster the effective utilization of feedback, therefore, successful systems encourage the generation of feedback in both formal and informal ways. Through activities which enhance informal reflection and through formalized systemic structures which support communication, feedback loops and the dissemination of information such systems utilize regular reflection as a means of improving teacher learning.

The inclusion of individual and group reflection as a feedback mechanism.

Understanding the roles that various forms of feedback play in an educational system, therefore, and the ways in which this feedback leads to a modification of practice is an important aspect of professional learning communities. Harris and Lambert (2003) stress that communication needs to be “open and fluid, include feedback loops and be practiced [*sic*] by everyone.... The central function of [the] system is to create and share information and to interpret and make sense of information as it is generated and shared” (p. 91). Ensuring that effective feedback loops have been established, feedback which assists educators in reflecting on their performance and the performance of their students, should be a *central function* of PLCs. “Almost uniformly in poor performing schools,” Hord and Sommers (2008) write, “there is the complaint about not knowing what is expected of educators’ performance or what educators can expect of the system. Well-developed communication structures support the professional learning community” (pp. 51-52). Open access to information and continued exposure to focused and relevant feedback is key, then, if teacher learning is to occur. That feedback, however, arises in various forms, through both individual and group constructions and through informal and formal structures.

Fostering processes which make space for and encourage individual and group reflection helps support the work of educators in a professional learning community. Wheatley (2009) encourages individuals to take “time to develop clarity and courage [and stresses that] if we want

our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that” (Wheatley, 2009, p. 103). Caught up in a world of external mandates and individual and contextual responsibilities, educators need spaces which allow them to step back for a moment and reflect on their practice. Lambert (2003) suggests that creating such informal and unstructured opportunities can provide critical information to educators as they seek to improve the quality of instruction.

Creating structures which allow for and encourage individual reflection brings meaningful feedback into educators’ work. Kottkamp (1990) defines reflection as “A cycle of paying deliberate attention to one’s own actions in relation to intentions for the purpose of expanding one’s opinions and making decisions about improved ways of acting in the future” (as cited in Oberg, 2008, p. 22). Educators, therefore, inform their practice by having opportunities to reflect on their work and modify future plans in light of this individually constructed feedback. Schön (1987) suggests that this type of personal reflection can take place in various time frames. These include “reflection-on-action” which takes place before or after the act of teaching to assess intended and actual outcomes and “reflection-in-action” where teachers modify teaching activities as a lesson unfolds based on how students are responding.

Such a generation of feedback can be a result of individually- and group-constructed feedback mechanisms. Like Schön (1987), York-Barr, Sommers, Ghore and Montie (2006) stress the importance of various types of reflective practices and their impact on the work of professional learning communities. When reflecting *on* practice, educators in PLCs reflect on class lessons, how instruction might be modified to arrive at different results and begin to see patterns in their teaching practice. Though time-consuming, such reflection has been tied to improvements in both instruction and student achievement. Additionally, dialogue regarding the *types* of data which will be used to inform both personal and group decisions and serve as

evidence of successful future instruction is likewise a key component of the feedback process; York-Barr et al. (2006) describe such work as reflection *for* action. When reflecting *for* action educators seek to plan improved instruction and solve problems in their current practice; such work plays a critical role in PLCs, assisting educators in setting goals, developing improved procedures and providing ways in which educators can measure success. Although reflection before, during and after instruction is important, “the most important reflection occurs after teaching and away from the hustle and bustle of classroom interactions. Reflection involves self-evaluation through a critical analysis of teaching decisions and their outcomes...” (Oberg, 2008, p. 23), a sentiment echoed by York-Barr et al. (2006).

Utilizing structures, both formal and informal, which allow educators to frequently construct learning goals, generate instruction aimed toward achieving these goals and review the effectiveness of instruction is a key way to integrate individually- and group-constructed feedback into an educational system (Hord & Sommers, 2008). As Oberg (2008) writes, “[R]eflection fosters professional growth and development, critical thinking, self-assessment, and self-directed learning. It promotes the development of new knowledge, leads to broader understanding, and creates greater self-awareness” (p. 24). Professional learning communities, therefore, create spaces in which educators can individually or collectively reflect upon the instruction and learning taking place in their school. Under such conditions feedback will present itself through both formal and informal structures.

Formalized feedback mechanisms. Although loosely structured opportunities for reflection and informal conversations with colleagues are important sources of feedback, it is likewise vital that more formalized processes and feedback loops help plan instruction and guide and disseminate feedback throughout the system. Establishing formal shared group goals against which performance and instruction can be measured can be a powerful source of feedback.

Collective goals for which educators are mutually responsible are useful in guiding the day-to-day practice of teachers and measuring improvement. Structures which help educators focus on goals help move professional learning communities from “vision [which] is the rhetoric of inspiration... [to] goals [which] are the rhetoric of accountancy” (Champy, 1995, p. 54).

Formalized goals suggest formalized structures to measure success.

Formal structures which assist educators in creating clear goals and measuring success toward attaining them help to integrate a valuable source of feedback into professional learning communities. Educators become energized and take purposeful action, DuFour et al. (2008) note, when goals are clear and feedback mechanisms aid in gauging progress. Such goals therefore need to be formally constructed and continually reflected upon. In order for goals to have a positive impact on any organization “they must be specific enough to help people in the organization gauge their progress and remain focused on the right priorities” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 159). To this end Conzemius and O’Neill (2005) suggest utilizing SMART goals which are Strategic/Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Timebound. Integrating such feedback mechanisms is an important component of the planning and work within professional learning communities.

In addition, as educators in PLCs plan instruction and garner feedback based on the effectiveness of their teaching in relation to the stated goals, administrators similarly play an important role in providing feedback. Having empowered teachers through professional learning communities and engaged them as learning leaders, principals need to provide teachers with feedback and support (DuFour et al., 2008). Harris and Lambert (2005) note that building and district administrators need to provide “support [which] includes staff development and offering evaluative feedback” (p. 205).

Opportunities to regularly provide both teachers and administrators with feedback should be a normal part of a professional learning community's structure. Principals might, for instance, meet regularly and dialogue with a PLC team or team leaders, inquiring as to the types of resources the team needs to successfully meet a goal while at the same time answering and offering suggestions to issues posed by the group (DuFour et al., 2008). Such meetings assist both team members and administrators in understanding the SMART goals the group has undertaken and how successfully the PLC is progressing toward reaching the stated goals in practice as opposed to on paper, valuable feedback which enriches the learning of all involved.

Structures which facilitate this interchange of information between educators and administrators help distribute answers to key aspects of the PLC's work. Such systems should, according to DuFour et al. (2008), disseminate details regarding the relationship between the learning of the group and district curriculum and standards. Furthermore, official processes should help all members of the system understand the essential skills being taught, share ways to make time for and assess these skills within reasonable time frames, and articulate how all involved will know that the learning has been achieved. Formalized and systemic processes need to be developed by administrators to share the learning being made individually and collectively throughout the PLC.

Because of the current isolated state of many teachers, receiving such feedback from an administrator, much like the initial stages of dialoguing with peers, can be difficult, though it is a crucial step in establishing feedback loops throughout the system. As one member of a PLC put it, "At the beginning the reform process was hard and sometimes very emotional. We weren't used to constructive criticism, and suddenly outside evaluators were giving us critical feedback" (Austin, Grossman, Schwartz & Suesse, 2006 as cited in Fullan, 2010a, p. 41). Professional learning communities, however, realize that such feedback is necessary in that it brings an outside

perspective to the work of the PLC group, raises new questions and assists members in clarifying beliefs and sharpening practice. As administrators transition into roles as learning leaders and plan regular visits with PLC teams they should “encourage teachers to become leaders, help teachers develop leadership skills and provide positive and limited constructive feedback” (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 45).

Successful and *self-renewing* improvement in professional learning communities is, Harris and Lambert (2003) note, dependent on a number of “reciprocal learning processes,” chief among them processes which help to “frame action and develop implementation plans” within schools where a “feedback [system] that remind[s] teachers of the progress and gains being made” is key (pp. 18-19). The ideas, viewpoints and suggestions of administrators are a much-needed source of feedback in professional learning communities and formalized feedback loops between instructors and administrators are needed if the entire professional community is to be supported in the process of continually striving to learn.

Summary

Professional development in the United States too often takes place in decontextualized and disjointed workshops and in increments which are far too infrequent to impact educator practice. Professional learning communities offer a powerful model for providing educational systems with substantial and job-embedded professional development squarely focused on advancing both student and teacher learning. Such work, when embraced throughout the system by teachers and administrators, distributes leadership and engages educators at all levels in the task of continually learning about practice and developing, implementing and analyzing the effectiveness of the adaptive solutions they develop. Under such circumstances it is essential that educators engage in a continuous dialogue with others and have access to various forms of feedback, available through both formal and informal structures, to help them individually and

collectively reflect upon their pedagogical practice and the effectiveness of their instruction.

However the formal and informal feedback loops at work in professional learning communities are not well-understood, nor are the ways in which such feedback results in changes to educators' classroom practice. This phenomenological study set out to explore the feedback loops present in a professional learning community and build descriptions of the experiences of educators as they gave and received feedback. By uncovering the best practices of providing and reacting to feedback this study addresses the current gap in the literature.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The literature identifies multiple benefits to utilizing a professional learning community model as a means of helping educators, schools and school systems change their emphasis from what is taught to what is learned. Furthermore, it provides suggestions as to how such work should be integrated into the regular fabric of schooling. Little is known, however, about the feedback loops which educational systems use, the types of formal and informal feedback teachers and administrators give and receive, and how various types of feedback impact their practice and influence what their life is like as individuals living and working in a professional learning community. How do educators give and receive feedback within the PLC model? How does involvement in such processes impact the ways in which they give and respond to feedback? What experiences would they identify as having had the largest impact on their practice?

The proposed research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice?
2. What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?
3. How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide?
4. How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice have changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community?

5. What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice?

Design of the Study

The purpose of the study was to learn how educators and administrators described the type of feedback they utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they have given and received feedback having worked within one such a model, and how their membership and the feedback they have received through this model has led to a modification of instruction. The research utilized a phenomenological approach to build the descriptions of the impact of feedback in a PLC on participants’ professional thinking and practice.

Phenomenological research, according to Grbich (2007), is an approach “which attempts to understand the hidden meanings and the essence of an experience together with how participants make sense of these [experiences]” and should be used when “the rich detail of the essence of people’s experiences of a phenomenon is to be explored, described, communicated and possibly interpreted” (p. 84). Phenomenological research involves engaging the views of multiple research participants to build descriptions of the ways in which they have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The goals of this research study, therefore, were closely aligned with the aims of phenomenological research.

Phenomenological research draws heavily on the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and has a long-standing use in fields such as sociology, psychology and education (Creswell, 2007). Although multiple phenomenological approaches and beliefs exist, all agree that such research examines “the study of lived experiences of persons, [is premised on] the views that these experiences are conscious ones... and [focuses on] the development of descriptions of

the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Merleau-Ponty suggests that individual perceptions are filtered through human consciousness and the world; if participants’ lived experiences within the PLC are to be uncovered, therefore, descriptions of the data, information and feedback upon which individual participants focus and the contexts in which these interactions transpire must be described (Flynn, 2009; Pinar et al., 2004; Creswell, 2007).

This phenomenological research study made use of a phenomenological approach. The intent of phenomenology is to focus “less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). The design of this phenomenological study embraced the concepts of Moustakas (1994) which Creswell (2007) summarized as a process of

...identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon [after which] the researcher... analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes. [As information is analyzed] the researcher develops *textural descriptions* of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a *structural description* of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience.

(Creswell, 2007, p. 60; emphasis in original)

This phenomenological study therefore set out to add to the research on professional learning communities by building detailed descriptions of administrators and educators in a PLC and sought to describe their lived experience of giving and receiving feedback and modifying practice within the context of their individual circumstances.

Although phenomenological research has a long history, criticisms exist which bear noting. Phenomenological research is often criticized because researchers sometimes do not clearly relate the specific phenomenological approach they will use, information which must be clarified. Bracketing out the experiences of the researcher is also often a difficult process and thorough attention must be paid to this aspect of the study. The selection of participants within a phenomenological study is also of critical importance; ensuring that all participants have experienced the phenomenon under study and are able to assist in building detailed descriptions of the shared experience is vital. A final area of critique often focuses on the difficulty of knowing when the themes associated with the phenomenon have been fully saturated and thus when the research process has been thoroughly completed (Gribch, 2007; Creswell, 2007). The researcher is aware of such concerns and criticisms and has carefully designed the study and taken precautions to limit the possibility of such critiques.

Sampling

Sampling within phenomenological research consists of selecting participants who have all experienced the same phenomenon after which individuals who can best help build complete and varied descriptions of the phenomenon should be selected so as to saturate the themes uncovered in participant descriptions. Phenomenological research consists of conducting “in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) and therefore the sample size should stay reasonably small; generally one to twenty-five participants, all of whom have experienced the phenomenon under study, should be selected (Creswell, 2007; Hycner, 1985; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). In this case the phenomenon under study centered on the lived experience of high school English educators working together as a professional learning community and the administrators with whom they worked. Hycner (1985) writes that in phenomenological research “the phenomenon dictates the method (not nice-versa) including even

the selection and type of participants.... Part of the ‘control’ and rigor’ emerges from the type of participants chosen and their ability to fully describe the experience being researched” (p. 294). The study therefore made use of purposeful sampling to select a professional learning community team which would “be ‘information rich’ with respect to the purpose of the study” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 178). The research participants from the high school English Department selected fit the definition of a professional learning community as outlined by DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006) and the principal and vice principal played an integral part in the history and functioning of the PLC group. With a total of nine English teachers in the department and with each teacher being a member of one horizontally- and one vertically-aligned team all members of the English Department were invited to participate in the research sample. Eight of the total nine volunteered to participate and were included in the study; the remaining member of the English Department, in her final month before retirement, chose not to participate. An e-mail of introduction (see Appendix A) and a formal research proposal (see Appendix B) sent to both high school and district administrators explained the purpose of the research; follow-up phone conversations led to small modifications in the study’s design and to the identification of individuals who would best help address the research questions.

Instrumentation

Since phenomenological research is concerned with building descriptions of the lived experiences of participants, data collection usually takes the form of interviewing and the collection of other relevant artifacts (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Hycner, 1985). According to Creswell (2007) in-depth interviews are the primary means of collecting data in phenomenological research. “The important point is to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (p. 131); to arrive at these deep descriptions multiple interviews, sometimes quite long in duration, are often needed.

Institutional Review Board approval. The researcher sent an e-mail of introduction and conducted follow-up phone conversations with the district administrator, high school principal, and the English Department chair to secure the initial permissions necessary to explore the possibility of conducting the proposed research; these communications explained the purpose of the research and served to identify potential research participants. After IRB approval (see Appendix I) an invitation letter (see Appendix C) was sent to potential teacher participants. A short presentation was arranged during which the researcher met with teachers and administrators and explained the nature and purpose of the study. Signed consent forms were collected from those agreeing to participate (see Appendices G and H).

Individual face-to-face interviews were arranged with each participant and were conducted in closed classrooms and offices. Both the high school principal and vice-principal participated in a single extended interview arranged on site at their convenience; the same Administrator Interview Guide (see Appendix D) was used to guide each interview. Teachers participating in the study also provided responses in a single individual interview; interviews were similarly arranged at the teacher's convenience, took place in closed classrooms and teacher offices and were guided by the Teacher Interview Guide (see Appendix E). Finally, classroom teachers involved in the study participated in a focus group conducted in a closed classroom at a mutually-agreeable time. Although the Teacher Focus Group Guide (see Appendix F) was used to ground the conversation in the study's research questions, the focus group format was intended to elicit further information surfaced through the group dynamic. Such an approach is "advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, [and] when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other..." as was the case in the PLC team being studied (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). All interviews began with a reminder of the purpose of the study, utilized the established interview protocols, stressed the importance of open

and honest responses, and were conducted solely by the researcher. A digital audio-recorder was used to collect interview data; in addition videotaped data was also collected during the focus group for the sole purpose of assisting in identifying participant voices during transcription.

The Interview Guides addressed issues of reliability and validity, ensuring that questions were asked reliably within like groups of participants and were directly related to the primary research questions of the study. While the various guides ensured that specific questions were asked consistently in each interview, phenomenological research is intended to describe the research participant's lived experience. Arriving at such descriptions is not a linear process and therefore interviews, though addressing the questions outlined in the Interview Guides, were allowed to unfold organically as participants revealed and reflected upon their experience. The freedom of the interview, which is "capable of detecting many aspects of experience that may prove to be important" and that were relevant though not necessarily included on the Interview Guides, was embraced throughout the interview process (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 497).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability in qualitative research "indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects" (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). Qualitative researchers, Yin (2003) suggests, should therefore carefully document the steps taken as research procedures unfold. All research was conducted by the primary investigator in this study; the creation and utilization of the various Interview Guides ensure that questions essential to the focus of the research were asked reliably in each interview instance.

In qualitative research validity may more aptly be aligned with the term accuracy; qualitative validity details the procedures used to determine "whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the reader of an account" (Creswell & Miller, 2000 as cited in Creswell, 2009). Various approaches including the triangulation of data

from multiple perspectives to arrive at a convergence of themes, the use of member checking where research findings are re-presented to participants prior to publication to ensure their accuracy, the creation of rich, thick descriptions which detail and contextualize the research, a revelation of bias through bracketing procedures to ensure an open and honest dialogue with readers and the inclusion of information which may be negative or contradict the major findings of the research all improve the accuracy of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Each of the aforementioned approaches was utilized to ensure the validity of the study's research findings.

Bracketing

Phenomenological research often requires researchers to attempt to bracket their personal experience so as to raise awareness of and remove potential bias from the study. Creswell (2007), in reviewing the work of Moustakas (1994), writes that researchers should apply a bracketing mechanism "in which investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under investigation" (pp. 59-60). In so doing researchers are critically reflective on their past experiences and personal views as related to the phenomenon and therefore work to "disconnect [their] world's 'taken for granted' reality [and] concentrate on the structures of [their] conscious experience.... [so that] the essence of the phenomenon will become evident" (Grbich, 2007, p. 85).

Bracketing is thus intended to help both the researcher and reader understand the ways in which past experiences might potentially influence the research and, through naming and attempting to remove such views, help better see and explore the true essence of the phenomenon (Grbich, 2007). Although the researcher has bracketed out past experiences relevant to this research study Merleau-Ponty believed that the complete bracketing of experience was impossible since the human experience is filtered through human consciousness and interaction with the world. It bears noting, however, that this research assumes that, though every attempt has

been made to thoroughly bracket out relevant experiences, it is impossible to remove all personal influence. Maintaining that such complete and unequivocal bracketing is necessary is, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, infeasible and unnecessary as long as researchers are open and honest with their personal viewpoints (Flynn, 2009).

Response Bias

Addressing issues of potential bias within research is always of critical import; social desirability response bias was the most relevant to the study outlined herein.

According to Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon and Podsakoff (2003), social desirability response bias “refers to the tendency of some people to respond to items more as a result of their social acceptability than their true feelings” (p. 882). Because research participants are all members of the same high school English department and have close professional relationships enhanced by weekly collaborative work, participants may have a tendency to “present themselves in a favorable light, regardless of their true feelings about an issue or topic” (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon & Podsakoff, 2003, p. 881). Social desirability bias might be especially heightened in focus group work. For this reason the study utilized private individual interviews in closed rooms to gather responses away from the influence of the group, thus attempting to mitigate problems of response bias. In addition, all participants in the study were assured personal anonymity and that, whenever possible every effort would be made to remove identifying information when reporting the findings of the study; such practices we similarly meant to mitigate issues of response bias. Later the focus group responses from each participant, which took place after the conclusions of all individual interviews, were compared to their private statements to look for deviations in responses under varied reporting circumstances.

The fact that some of the study’s participants were former students in the researcher’s Methods of Composition course during their university careers also opened the door to potential

social desirability response bias. Although the instruction these participants received made no mention of professional learning communities some participants, it could be argued, might misrepresent their true feelings so as to make attempts at “pleasing” the researcher. Throughout the process steps were taken to be very clear with all participants that the research being conducted was interested in soliciting open and honest descriptions of their lived experiences, both positive and negative. The Participant Consent Form and the opening scripts to all Guides reinforced these points and data from the individual interviews and focus group responses were compared throughout the data analysis phase of the research to surface potential discrepancies and drift over time.

Data Collection

Data for this phenomenological study came from three sources: (a) audio-taped one-on-one interviews with each teacher and administrator guided by the Teacher or Administrator Interview Guide, (b) an audio-taped focus group composed solely of the teacher participants, and (c) handwritten notes the researcher created during individual and group interviews. These varied forms of data were used to uncover themes and build thick descriptions of the experiences of participants as they gave, received and reflected upon the impact of feedback in their personal practice and as members of the professional learning community under study.

Demographic information from state and local websites was summarized and synthesized to both describe the high school under study as well as place it in the larger context of the school district in which it resides. Concerned with the role that PLCs have played in the lives of participants, data from individual interviews were likewise used to build a more personal history of the high school’s past.

Interviews began with first the principal and then the assistant principal (who also serves as the district’s 7-12 curriculum director) to establish the larger historical context in which the

high school's professional learning community model developed. The principal and assistant principal each took part in an extensive face-to-face interview and were asked about the history of PLCs in their district as well as their personal experiences as administrators working within this system. Individual teacher participants took part in a single interview which, to accommodate their schedules, was arranged in their classrooms or offices and at their convenience either during the school day or after the conclusion of their daily schedule. Individual interviews were used to establish the participant's professional history, their relationship with the district and their experiences prior to and working within the district's professional learning community model. In addition teacher participants also shared responses in a focus group setting arranged at the high school at a time that was mutually agreeable. Used to address many of the same questions teacher participants were asked in individual interviews, the focus group centered on the collective and shared experiences of the group to better understand the dynamic interactions between individuals as they came to experience and work within a professional learning community.

After having completed all interviews the audio was transcribed and the researcher synthesized and compiled the findings of the study. These results were sent to each participant and participants were asked to check them for their accuracy; in this way participants had the opportunity to provide additional information and feedback, if needed, to further clarify the research results. In addition to improving the accuracy of the results through this member-checking approach it provided the individuals involved in the study the opportunity to review the findings before they became public.

Data Analysis

As interviews were conducted data was manually transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The data collected underwent a number of treatments based on guidelines established by Creswell (2007) and Hycner (1985). Using an approach advocated by Hycner (1985),

individual and group interviews were transcribed and reviewed. These typed transcriptions were reviewed and the researcher created “units of general meaning” (Hycner, 1985, p. 282) to encapsulate the statements of each participant throughout their individual interview. When necessary follow-up interviews were conducted to elaborate on themes uncovered in these early conversations; information gained from individual interviews was used to guide and modify focus group questions so as to saturate the units of meaning both within and between the various themes. After all interviews and the focus group were complete the researcher re-examined the data to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the units of general meaning. After this process was completed the researcher then applied the research questions to the units of general meaning; this process of “delineating [the] units of meaning relevant to the research questions” (Hycner, 1985, p. 284) was used to arrive at the key themes elaborated upon in this study. Hycner’s (1985) approach of coding information to uncover the major themes present in the data was applied until all questions and themes were effectively saturated. Data and coding were reviewed numerous times to ensure their accuracy.

As the research neared the final stages of analysis the researcher purposefully utilized triangulation of various data sources whenever possible, ensured that descriptions were rich and contextualized, returned to the bracketing of personal experiences to guarantee that personal views were thoroughly and openly expressed, worked to including dissenting voices and ultimately presented research participants with the findings prior to publication to ensure their accuracy, all steps suggested by Creswell (2009) to ensure the validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The school and school district involved in this study publically acknowledged their utilization of a professional learning community model as described by DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006). Research participants included in this study came from the administrative and

English educator ranks of the high school and, after receiving a letter of introduction and personally meeting with the researcher to discuss the extent and purpose of the study, volunteered to participate.

To ensure anonymity the identity of the school district, high school, administrators and teachers involved in the study was not disclosed; instead a fictitious high school name was used and participants were simply identified as “an administrator” or “a teacher” in notes, transcriptions and in reporting the findings so as to maintain individual confidentiality.

Setting

The high school in the study, hereafter referred to as Central High, is the sole high school in a school district that serves over 4,000 students. Central High enrolls more than 1,200 students yearly in grades nine through twelve. With a 98% graduation rate, 86% of those graduates going to postsecondary schooling, and more than 20 Advanced Placement courses available Central High has earned recognition at the national level for academic excellence.

The school district, Central High and the English Department from which teacher participants were drawn has a long history of collaboration. Monthly two-hour early dismissals have been a regular part of the district’s professional development plan for more than 15 years and it should therefore come as little surprise that the district moved to ultimately adopt a professional learning community model. Moving from a small volunteer group at the high school in the early 2000s to previewing a full-scale professional learning community model district wide in the 2008-2009 school year, the school district fully implemented their PLC model in the fall of 2009. Throughout the district weekly meetings took place in each building; in addition teachers met monthly with colleagues from other buildings (e.g. high school and middle school English) to collaborate on issues of vertical curricular alignment. At Central High School PLC groups met weekly with colleagues from their own academic departments; those who taught various

electives, however, were placed in more mixed groups (e.g. physical education, art, music and world languages). Although in 2009-2010 teams initially met in classrooms the building administration felt that this isolated teachers. As a result they mandated that PLC meetings take place in the library so as to increase transparency and allow teachers to have easier access to each other during these collaborative sessions. Teachers worked in groups to first create learning targets after which they began creating common formative and common summative assessments for courses; teachers collaborated on these assessments when possible, especially in instances of multi-section classes. As teachers collaborated on learning targets and assessments the administration circulated and assisted whenever possible. Each group provided documentation indicating where they were on this continuum; this information was stored and presented to administration for review.

Implementing the model at the district level, however, was not without some difficulties. As teachers generated and reported on learning targets and constructed various assessments the ability of the district and administrators to process and respond to the massive amount of information being generated became systemically challenging. Recognizing the issues inherent in collecting, storing and providing meaningful feedback on such a large amount of information the district, Central High School included, made three key changes for the 2011-2012 school year. The implemented changes meant that: (a) teachers no longer met in a single large departmental setting but rather chose two teams, based off overlapping vertically- and horizontally-aligned teaching responsibilities, to further focus their work; (b) in addition to the continued creation and revision of common formative and summative assessments teachers were required to analyze a chosen set of student data each quarter and compose a written reflection tying the learning gained from the analysis to their teaching practice; and (c) PLC coaches were added to oversee the tasks of each group, ensure that assessments, data analysis, reflections and other required documents

were submitted in a binder, and to improve communication between PLC teams and the administration with the hopes of providing additional feedback to all involved. These substantial changes to both the arrangement of PLC teams and the official feedback loops between educators and administration help establish the context in which this study took place.

Participants

Both the principal and assistant principal at Central high school participated in this study. The principal, an employee of the district for 34 years, had a wide-ranging career including teaching in Central High's English Department, in alternative education and at-risk programs, and in various roles moving from being an elementary school principal to an assistant principal at Central High School and finally fulfilling the role of principal at Central High for the last four years. As a former assistant principal and as the current principal at Central High he was at the core of a group which met informally to study the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning model. The assistant principal, who had also taken on responsibilities as the 7-12 curriculum director in the 2011-2012 school year, had a fourteen-year history with the district and, after many years as a guidance counselor, moved to an assistant principal position in the fall of 2007. Involved in the same informal book study group as the building principal, the assistant principal was drawn to the ways in which school structures could improve teacher practice by decreasing isolation and promoting problem-solving skills in teams. Both administrators were advocates for groups of educators from Central High who wanted to attend presentations by the DuFours on professional learning communities and for visits to see PLCs in action. Ultimately these administrators worked with others to convince school and district leaders to establish PLC structures throughout the district and implement many of the key features of professional learning communities as outlined in this study; they continued to shape the evolution of these structures.

The whole of Central's English Department, with the exception of one retiring teacher, were involved as participants in this study. These eight teacher participants spanned the normal spectrum of years of experience, teaching responsibilities and familiarity with PLC structures, though they were evenly split between veteran and early-career teachers. One teacher participant, the most senior member of the English Department, had 24 years of teaching experience in the district. In addition to teaching AP courses which are both individually- and team-taught he had served as the English Department Chair and held this position throughout the district's transition to the PLC model. A second teacher participant was also a veteran of the department; as a graduate of Central High and as someone who completed her student teaching at her alma mater she likewise had 24 years of experience in the district. In addition to working with students tracked into "essential" and "regular" sections she was selected as a PLC coach in the 2011-2012 school year. As a result her experience prior to PLC structures, as well as her increased involvement as Central's PLC model continued to be modified, was extensive. In her first year as a coach she worked with an elective PLC team consisting of teachers from multiple electives including physical education, art, music and world languages; this varied mix of individuals and the unique challenges they faced helped this teacher participant see both the strengths and struggles present in the lives of educators working in PLCs. A third veteran teacher with 21 years of teaching experience in the district, eleven of them at Central High School, also participated in the study. Having taught each of the three tracked levels over her career this participant, like others with extended careers in the district, had substantial experience in working at Central High prior to the officially-sanctioned professional learning community structures and valuable knowledge in understanding how these changes have impacted her practice. The final veteran teacher of the group had been teaching in Central's English Department for 13 years. With a teaching assignment that included teaching English III "Regulars" in addition to AP Language

and with 13 years of experience in the district she likewise recalls what practice was like prior to the introduction of PLCs and how her practice has changed as PLCs have morphed and grown.

Four early-career teachers were likewise participants in the study. The most senior member of these early-career teachers had been teaching English at Central for the past five years. Teaching primarily English III Honors and AP Literature this teacher participant, having been an English educator in the district for five years, had spent one year at Central prior to the implementation of the professional learning community model. A second early-career teacher took a non-traditional approach to education and arrived at a career in teaching later in life; with three years of teaching experience, all of them as a member of Central's English Department, his course load includes teaching sophomores in English II in addition to "essential" students at various levels. Having not experienced a structured professional learning community during his student teaching, he came to the district in the first year of PLC implementation and thus had seen PLC structures evolve from large departmental meetings focused on learning targets to the current smaller two-team approach meant to help teachers create, analyze and reflect upon student assessments. Another relatively new teacher participant first completed an internship with Central's English Department while student teaching and had been an official member of the department for the past two years; during this time her primary teaching responsibilities included English I for freshmen and AP Literature. Feeling that her university practicum experience prior to coming to Central took place in an isolating teacher environment she was eager to enter the professional learning community the district had established. Having spent one year under the large-scale whole department arrangement and the current year in the smaller and more focused vertically- and horizontally-aligned structures supported by a PLC coach she has experienced PLCs during a major transitional phase. The final early-career teacher participant was a first-year teacher; as a new educator she had been responsible for teaching freshmen "essentials" in English

I and sophomore “regulars” in English II. Though she felt as though her pre-service teaching experiences took place in environments in which lessons were shared, discussed and adjusted based on the response of fellow pre-service teachers, her professional experience had completely transpired within Central’s PLC model.

The experiences of these two administrative and eight teaching participants represent the core of this phenomenological study.

Chapter 4. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn how educators and administrators described the type of feedback they utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they have given and received feedback having worked within such a model, and how their membership and the feedback they have received through this model have led to a modification of instruction.

Specifically, the research addressed the following questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice?
2. What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?
3. How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide?
4. How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice have changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community?
5. What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice?

The study was conducted at a nationally ranked high school in Wisconsin which serves students in grades nine through twelve; the school and school district began to implement a professional learning community model in the 2008-2009 school year. The study made use of purposeful sampling to select a school that was rich in information relevant to the research

questions; the research participants from the high school English Department selected fit the DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many's (2006) description of a true professional learning community and the principal and vice principal played an integral part in the history and functioning of the PLC group.

The Historical Development and Current Context of Central High's PLCs

Although this research study is primarily concerned with the above research questions and the ways in which participants experienced feedback in the year under study it is important to recognize that the PLC model utilized by the district was ever-evolving and, being three years old, was truly in its infancy. The historical context which follows enhances understanding of how professional learning community structures came to be and how they have continued to evolve. Furthermore, it illuminates how feedback systems have changed and thus impacted teacher practice, vital background necessary to fully contextualize the experiences which participants relate.

Central's interest in professional learning communities began with a study of the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning process in the early 2000's. Supported by both administrators in this study, PLCs ultimately first took hold in the high school, were introduced to all district staff in 2008-2009, and were fully implemented beginning in fall of 2009. Begun as an informal coffee-shop conversation over the Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning model by members of Central's teaching and administrative staff, the group pursued research which helped them use data to analyze and understand student learning and engage teachers in ways which encouraged collaborative problem-solving. Ultimately this led to voluntary teacher teams at Central conducting action research to identify both behavioral and academic problems and find solutions, work which one administrator noted was "very much a pre-PLC; it was along the same

lines.” Participation in these voluntary groups continued to expand and allowed teams to develop small and achievable goals so that they could experience success.

As the team and teachers continued to research they encountered the work of the DuFours and began considering how professional learning community structures might amplify their work and be utilized as a professional development framework for the entire district. As an administrator notes, having become “excited that we’d found a particular model that spoke to us with a lot of the issues already worked out” multiple teacher teams from the high school were sent to institutes run by the DuFours from 2004 to 2006. Though the administrators in this study felt the then superintendent did not fully support the move, the model was expanded to include the whole district in 2006-2007. Outside trainers were brought in to orient the elementary schools, middle school and entire high school to PLC concepts. A visit to Adlai Stevenson High School to see the DuFours ultimately led to the superintendent’s endorsement of the PLC model and district-wide implementation. Administrative presentations in 2008-2009 PLCs explained how the district planned to implement their professional learning community model in the upcoming year.

As enacted in their first year, PLCs at Central High School meant weekly structured 45-minute times to meet as a department and focus on creating clear learning targets for each course utilizing student-centered language. Meeting in classrooms teachers worked to generate learning targets and report them to administration, a process which one administrator felt was “very collaborative in its course” and which teachers felt provided an improved framework for professional development. On Tuesday mornings throughout the year PLC teams at Central High thus met to create shared learning targets. When learning targets were complete they turned their attention to the creation of common formative and summative assessments.

All the while PLC structures at Central High continued to adapt as the system attempted to learn from the work being done and create structures more conducive to supporting the central

work of improving student learning. For instance, having used PLCs to actively involve every teacher, not just those in the previous voluntary teams, administrators found it difficult to oversee the large number of groups. According to one administrator the PLC process “grew quantitatively so large so fast... [that it actually] eliminated specific knowledge and feedback” from the system. In another instance, having recognized the way in which the large geographic size of the building limited the ability of the administration to interact with teacher teams, the administration mandated that all PLC teams move weekly meetings to the library in an attempt to increase transparency and reduce isolation. As a result teachers had regular access to their departmental colleagues, their peers throughout the building and the administration. What is more, the administrative team felt that they were more readily available and could more effectively monitor each team’s progress and provide informal feedback. In this revised setting teachers worked to create learning targets and shared formative and summative assessments, all of which were presented in binders to the administration. Having the time to review and respond to these teacher-generated materials proved difficult for administrators, however, and therefore PLC coaches, in addition to a number of other structural changes, were made for the 2011-2012 school year.

In the year under study multiple changes were made to PLC structures in the attempt to focus course content and heighten teacher learning, manage the work being done, increase reflective practices and improve both communication and accountability between educators and administration. In place of large departmental meetings teachers instead were required to choose to become members of one horizontally-aligned and one vertically-aligned departmental team; examples included groups of horizontally-aligned freshmen English teachers, a vertically-aligned freshmen and sophomore “essentials” team, and a group of teachers who taught junior and senior AP electives. All teacher participants echoed the value of these more focused working groups as

they continued to create, implement, discuss and revise assessments as a part of Central's PLC structure. Meant to clarify the work of these smaller teams, checklists for quarterly requirements and the collection of supporting documentation in a binder were likewise added to system structures. Furthermore, to strengthen ties between PLC work and student learning teachers were required to first analyze and then reflect upon their instruction in relation to a particular student performance, work similarly compiled in the physical binder. Finally PLC coaches were added in an attempt to improve teacher-administrator communications, build feedback loops into the system, manage the amount of data being generated and increase teacher accountability for meeting PLC goals. Filling a need for oversight and communication, PLC coaches checked in with departmental groups during weekly meetings, guided groups toward quarterly assessment, analysis reflection and reporting needs, compiled their team's collective data and passed it to the administration, and met monthly with other PLC coaches and the district's two curriculum coordinators to discuss the progress of their groups and relay issues to the administration. Such is the context which frames the past and present of PLC structures under which the participants in this study have worked.

Results and Discussion

As conversations unfolded and the lived experience of the various participants began to take form it quickly became apparent that there was substantial overlap between the ways in which teachers' and administrators' professional lives had changed due to the implementation and continued modifications to professional learning community structures; their experiences clearly informed more than one of the research questions. In this section, therefore, the research questions are addressed within each of the major themes. To help synthesize this information and place it in the larger context of the literature each theme ends with a discussion connecting the results to the larger base of literature of which it now becomes a part.

The major themes which arose from examining the lived experience of each participant are:

1. the need for trust in educational environments if practice is to be openly shared with professional colleagues;
2. the role of PLCs in reducing isolation, fostering collaboration, providing increased feedback and increasing teachers' desires for additional meaningful and timely feedback;
3. a shift from focusing on the content that is taught and how it is covered to an improved focus on student learning supported by relevant data;
4. the importance of considering potential feedback and power implications when mandating PLC features, working with others in a more transparent system and working to improve accountability; and
5. the need to carefully consider the role that systemic structures have on fostering collaboration to avoid further isolating professionals, making feedback meaningful to both individuals and the system in both the near and long terms, and how to best allocate time to successfully support teacher and student learning.

Theme #1: Building Trust to Encourage an Open Sharing of Practice with Colleagues

One of the most recurrent themes in both the teacher and administrative interviews was the importance of trust between the initial administrative team from Central and the district's superintendent, Central's administrators and teachers and amongst teaching colleagues in the English Department. Growing and supporting trusting relationships was at the heart of much of participants' PLC experience.

Prior to the introduction of professional learning communities in the district, as the process was presented to the staff at Central and as it continued to evolve in its third year, the need to build trusting relationships which show individual investment in the process and each

other was clearly on the minds of participants. Expanding from the initial core of interested administrators and teachers, a substantial and personal investment in the process was necessary as the group regularly met on their own time to formally discuss issues of practice. Although the implementation of professional learning communities had already begun and trainers had been brought to the various schools throughout the district, Central High included, the then superintendent “still wasn’t on board at the time” according to one administrator. Knowing the importance of this administrator to the large-scale process, the team at Central used those who had strong relationships with the superintendent to further the process. A team of highly-trusted educators, which included the current high school principal, personally accompanied the superintendent on one of the visits to Adlai Stevenson High School to see the DuFours and, as one administrator put it, “to convince [the superintendent] that this [was] the way it should go.” Guided to the idea of PLCs by those he could trust, upon the superintendent’s return the administrators recall that from then on it was “no holds barred” as far as the then superintendent was concerned, and discussions turned toward how to improve staff buy-in and implement the professional leaning community model system-wide. Emanating from a group that had established trust and building on that foundation one administrator recalls that “it was very collaboratively based, very slow moving, although *moving*.”

As administrators learned to trust that teachers were using the new time set aside for PLC meetings appropriately, educators likewise strove to demonstrate that they were, indeed, utilizing the time to improve their professional practice. As departmental teachers initially worked in scattered classrooms administrators had to learn to trust that teachers were actually engaged in the work with which they had been tasked. One administrator felt that when Central went to full implementation “it grew so quickly so fast it became cumbersome to manage and to have those assurances that things were actually happening... You know, you can’t sit with [teacher groups]

and hold their hand.” Just as administrators felt a responsibility to learn to trust the educators in their building teachers likewise felt a need to demonstrate that they could be trusted to work independently. As one veteran teacher noted, when PLC groups meet “the professionalism needed to increase so that when you do have that time you are working on those things and not simply reading a paper or talking.” Working to improve the level of trust that all involved were dedicated to the process clearly played into the successful implementation of professional learning communities at Central High.

Furthermore, trust was crucial as conversations shifted from what is taught to what is learned (see Theme #3) and teachers, as required by newly-implemented PLC structures (see Theme #5), engaged in dialogues focused on analyzing and reflecting upon data and reporting their findings to the administration. As PLCs were implemented teachers recounted instances in which they struggled with creating common formative and common summative assessments. As their thoughts and instruction refocused on ensuring that each student had learned key concepts instead of the prior practice of making sure that particular material had been covered, teachers had to trust that such shifts were truly acceptable and permissible. One administrator recalled an instance in which they needed to reassure one of the teacher participants that modifying practice and focusing on skills was truly acceptable. As the administrator explained,

[She’s] an interesting teacher because she’s very competent... and she’s very good at what she does.... She just has really good pedagogy where she has that Madeline Hunter approach so kids know exactly what the expectation is, so she’s got that clarity.... One of the things she used to say a lot was, “Well these kids don’t read,” and she was looking for someone to give her permission to not have to teach some literature. I’m like, “Well maybe they won’t read *Huck Finn*, but will they read something else that’s shorter by Twain or shorter by that person?”

Trusting that they had permission to deviate from previously-approved curriculum and instead modify instruction to help students understand key concepts seemed a struggle for many educators. Similarly teachers often wrestled with reporting requirements; they needed to trust that they could utilize assessments of their own creation and include anecdotal information in their analysis, moving beyond external assessments if they so desired. Although administrators in the study continually reiterated that teachers were free to reflect on data beyond large-scale external assessments, many teachers seemed hesitant to make this move. One who did had come to trust the administrators through a one-on-one dialogue. When discussing this issue in the focus group with their colleagues the teacher shared,

I just had my end of the year summary with [the administrator and they] ended up telling me that I wasn't giving myself enough credit because I was *so* down about how the *scores* [had turned out]. And what I have to remember is for me, *personally*, I got 20 kids to read a 400 page book and tell me the book was better than the movie. *That* was an accomplishment. *That* was the best summative assessment I could have given all year long, was for kids to tell me, who *don't* read, who *hate* to read, have *never* read an entire book in their entire lives say, "I hated the movie because they didn't follow the book."

Encouraged by the conversation with the administrator this teacher included this anecdotal data as a portion of their final end-of-year summary. The teacher had come to trust that such evidence of student growth would be acceptable in the eyes of administration and would be viewed as an indication of an increased focus on student learning, not as a mark against them and deviant from acceptable reporting policies.

Finally, as PLC coaches oversaw the work of PLC groups and shared this work with administrators the teachers with whom they worked needed to equally trust that they could expose individual or group shortcomings and acknowledge that they required help from others if they

were to move forward. Trained by the administration to ask, “What do you need for professional development that will help you get past this block? What specifically do you need right now?” PLC coaches worked to establish trust between teachers and the administration and improve communication so that teams steadily progressed toward PLC goals. In like manner the administration worked to be supportive when evaluating teachers so that educators could trust that they could admit areas of weakness in their practice and seek assistance. Conversations over teacher evaluation, one administrator stressed, were not remedial but rather took a, “I know you’re doing good things. So what can I help you to change to attain this goal?” approach. In such ways educators and administrators, as they engaged in increased conversations over teacher practice, built trust that they were both working toward the same end goal: enhanced teacher learning, improved instruction and corresponding increases in student learning.

As study participants shared their experiences with PLCs, however, it became clear that the practice of establishing trust amongst the members of Central’s English Department was of critical importance as PLCs unfolded and new teachers joined the department. Though multiple participants noted that trust was enhanced by more than just the implementation of PLC structures most teachers, especially those earlier in their career, felt as though professional learning communities played an important role in helping them come to trust their colleagues. Although some participants had more than 20 years of experience teaching at Central and others were in their first year, one common feature related to building trusting relationships was increased access to one’s peers. While the more veteran teachers felt as though they had established this trust prior to the implementation of PLCs when a larger department and shared office space meant increased daily interactions with colleagues some, especially the less veteran teachers, often felt geographically isolated. In most cases the move to a professional learning community model and the increased interaction which such structures fostered was viewed as an important way in which

teachers came to know each other and build trust, a key precursor to feeling safe in exposing one's practice to others. Participants who were veterans in the district or who shared office space for an extended period of time noted that the daily interaction was what helped them establish trust in their colleagues. Two participants currently sharing an office, the only two English teachers in such an arrangement, noted that the ability to trust each other as they talked about classes and critiqued each other's work was "a necessity for [them] professionally." One veteran teacher, however, was not so sure that this ability to trust the advice of colleagues was a result of implementing a PLC model. As they noted, "Does [improved practice] come directly from the PLC meetings on Tuesdays? No. That comes from every day, every day, every day, sharing an office with a person, the people that I do." Another veteran teacher stressed the importance of geography and regular access to peers in building trust and improving practice, though she felt that Central's professional learning community organization may have helped emphasize some of that previous access which had waned in recent years. As this teacher viewed it,

I think what happened here that promoted a lot of interaction, even prior to PLC, which *formalizes* it, was that there were 16 of us in this department. And we covered the same number of rooms that we have now and there were two and three of us in every office, at least.

At present each teacher participant, with the exception of the two aforementioned teachers, had an office or classroom office of their own. Participants, especially the early-career educators, found PLC structures much more important in helping them know their colleagues, come to trust them and thus engage in dialogue over practice and student learning. Having only worked in Central's PLC environment one early-career teacher noted that being a member of a professional learning community had helped alleviate fear and build trust.

I think [in PLCs] inherently we become more comfortable with people because you're talking to them on a consistent basis, so it creates an environment of warm approachability. [Having the PLC] made me feel more comfortable even starting last year during PLC in the big group. I never talked. I just listened because I was scared to death. But now that I see people talking all the time, and it's smaller teams too, I'm not afraid to talk to the department head. I feel like if I weren't put in a group with him as a peer I would always see him as superior and always be afraid.

The ways in which weekly meetings with PLC team members helped individuals feel comfortable with others and discuss issues of practice were echoed repeatedly by early-career teachers.

Considering the ways in which PLCs may have impacted teachers' access to one another and thus their ability to know and trust each other and open up their practice, one veteran teacher summed up the transition to PLCs nicely saying,

Maybe the thing that's changed the most for us is that we, because we've become a smaller department, we're spread out more [and] we don't have that proximity. So having the PLCs is probably good because we are forced to come back together where before we were *forced* because we were in the same offices space.

All participants noted the importance of frequent contact with colleagues in establishing trusting relationships. And although more veteran teachers may have felt such supports existed prior to PLC implementation and beginning teachers saw their professional learning community groups as being central to forming such trust, all agreed that trust was a foundational element necessary to openly discuss teaching practice.

As was the case between teachers and administrators, PLC structures, enhanced by trusting relationships, seemed to encourage educators to open their practice to closer scrutiny, have confidence in the advice of their peers and feel safe in noting potential weaknesses in

practice which their colleagues might help them overcome. In one instance an early-career teacher recognized a disconnect between the established curriculum and their students' learning needs. In such a case the teacher had to trust that their PLC team would support the modification of future instruction even if it deviated from the curriculum. As this teacher recalled,

So [at the beginning of the year the district] gave me a huge curriculum to follow and I tried to do it for the first three weeks but I realized the curriculum that they gave me wasn't going to work with my kids or me... I kind of had to scrap it and come up with my own thing to do, following, still what [the district and my colleagues] wanted me to accomplish... I was leery of bringing it [to my PLC group]. "I'm reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* with my essentials kids; it's a 370-some page book. Um... It's going to take two quarters. How do we feel about this?" And I got looks. But I thought it was worth it in the end.

The ability and willingness to discuss such issues of practice with colleagues seemed enhanced by the trust which such small-group PLC meetings fostered. As the professional learning community model shifted teachers into smaller vertically- and horizontally-aligned groups, participants likewise felt that this enhanced the trust which one could place in the advice of one's peers. As one teacher noted trust is improved

...just because [these small group colleagues] are doing this same thing and so they might be able to give me feedback on what happened in their class or what has happened this year already for them. If it's with someone who hasn't taught it before then they're just really giving me what they think; it may not be based on experience.

Another early-career teacher expressed a similar sentiment; quick to acknowledge the limitations of their teaching experience and to value the advice which veteran teachers had to offer, this teacher had come to rely upon the guidance of his peers.

I've only been teaching a few years; I have a lot to learn. [One peer on my PLC team] is in her first year. And then we have another teacher who has been here 20 years and she's like Momma Bear. I don't hesitate to run to Momma Bear for, "What do you think?" ... That's what we do a lot. It can be humbling, but there's a certain trust there too.

Based on a belief that colleagues would help them overcome potential shortcomings in practice participants became vulnerable, knowing the advice of their peers would help them improve instruction and move forward. One teacher participant recalled an example in which they had developed a lesson and shared it with a colleague.

So I shared an activity that I did where they were broken up into groups and there was this whole scaffolding thing and then I shared it with [the other teacher] and then he did it in class and it just bombed because we have completely different teaching styles. But what was nice about that was the next time he came back he was like, "Why don't we switch classes and you do it with them so that you know what you're doing and I can just watch your kids?" And I guess what was nice about that was that we'd been working together all year so I was comfortable enough to share but then also not completely shut down when he said, "That didn't work." But he *knew* me well enough to *trust* that it did work in [my classes].

Supported by frequent conversations about practice and focused on student learning, PLC structures seemed to foster trust amongst teacher participants, led them to seek advice from peers and have faith in the good intentions of their colleagues to help them improve instruction and student learning. In the final analysis one veteran teacher stated it best, saying,

You know, what I think is at the heart of everything and making this work... has to be trust.... I mean, you can have the best intentions and the best understanding of PLCs and

want to be moving the district forward, but if there's a lack of trust then people are going to clam up and they're not going to be willing to put themselves at risk.

Creating systems which nurture frequent interactions to build trusting relationships appears central to the implementation of a successful PLC model; without trust feedback systems within professional learning communities will not realize their full potential and will be devoid of the critical dialogue necessary to expose and modify practice so as to improve student learning.

Discussion within the context of the literature. The findings on trust reinforce much of the current literature on successful school change and modification to practice. In order to realize the PLC model at the school and district levels participants in the study repeatedly mentioned their ability to both leverage the trust they had previously established with others and their ability to create and reinforce trusting environments. Barth (2006) notes that “A precondition for doing *anything* to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice...” (p. 13; emphasis in original). A trusting collegial culture focused on improving practice was at the center of the original informal administrative and teacher team, helped convince teachers to engage in voluntary pre-PLC tasks, won the support of the then superintendent and ultimately developed into the district's professional learning community model. This model encouraged the educators in the study to work in ways which built trust within the group. As Brookfield (1987) suggests, such trust is necessary if individuals are to think critically, engage in open conversations of practice and effectively utilize the feedback of their colleagues. As participants in a system which reinforced the importance of putting trust in their own expertise and the collective knowledge of the group, interactions changed and teachers felt both affirmed and supported in their work. As Wheatley (2009) writes,

When we work for the common good, we experience each other in new ways. We don't worry about differences, or status, or traditional power relationships. We worry about

whether we'll succeed in accomplishing what needs to be done.... We learn what trust is.... These are always the conditions that bring out our best - we've focused on something we really care about; we work intensely together, inventing solutions as needed; we take all kinds of risks; we communicate constantly. (p. 130)

Working in professional learning communities in which dialogue over how to improve one's practice was commonplace, the teacher and administrator participants of this study, in varying degrees, learned to become more comfortable with exposing their practice to their colleagues. The introduction and adaptation of various features in Central's PLC model helped build educators' trust in the good intentions of their colleagues and helped them take ownership for their role in improving the system. As Senge (1990) might describe it, participants' involvement in a professional learning community seems to have helped facilitate "a shift of mind - from seeing [themselves] as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing [the impact of their] own actions" (p. 12). The professional learning community model used by Central High seems to have helped create and reinforce a foundation of trust. Withholding information, a problem which Barth (2006) notes often stymies school improvement, appeared antithetical to Central's PLC goals and the desires of the educators participating in the study.

In the end PLC structures seem to have successfully fostered trusting relationships and helped enhance Central's system. As Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) note, "Relationships are the pathways to the intelligence of the system. Through relationships, information is created and transformed, the organization's identity expands to include more stakeholders, and the enterprise becomes wiser" (Relationships section, para. 1). The trusting environment created by Central's PLCs encouraged the sharing of craft-knowledge and encouraged the entire system to become wiser in terms of practice and student learning.

Theme #2: The Role of PLCs in Reducing Isolation, Fostering Collaboration and Increasing Feedback and Increasing Teachers' Desires for Additional Feedback

The introduction of the professional learning community model used at Central High clearly helped teachers move from a context in which they individually developed lessons in a supportive, though often solitary, environment into one in which they came to create planning and assessments through a collaborative and reflective process. Prior to the advent of PLCs teachers almost universally recalled situations in which they were left to their own devices to create curriculum and assess content and skills of their own choosing. One administrator, who also taught in the district, recalls that when he began teaching 34 years ago

There was no curriculum. I had no textbook. I was told good luck... I found some grammar books, I found some very old literature books, and I taught what I wanted, including mythology. Time went on and we started working on curriculum and started to firm up the game a little bit, so to speak. It was cumbersome and filled with minutia and not practical.

A veteran English teacher remembers a similar situation.

I wasn't given pointers by other teachers about teaching... So for much of what I did in English III Honors, and actually in all of my preparations, I was kind of on my own. I introduced several books that either I had studied or I had an interest in, you know? And so the curriculum, within [the general boundaries of the printed curriculum], was kind of up to me.... It wasn't like we just taught whatever we felt like, but we had quite a bit of freedom within that.

Although participants in no way felt alienated from their peers as they began their careers and continually mentioned feeling supported by their colleagues as their time in the district grew, prior to the introduction of PLCs, and as recently as five years ago, the curricular aims of each

class, and each section within multi-section classes, seemed to be determined largely by the desires of the individual teacher. Like the more veteran teachers one early-career teacher who arrived at Central the year before professional learning communities were introduced, recalls, beyond access to the files of the previous teacher, being “kind of on my own. [Simply trying to survive my first year] as far as feedback was concerned I pretty much designed and implemented almost every aspect of every one of the courses that I taught [with the] curriculum to use as a guideline.” Early-career teachers likewise arrived after having completed their student teaching in a number of schools; none had taken part in a formalized professional learning community and few had experiences collaborating with colleagues beyond their cooperating teachers. One such teacher, in remembering their experience, said,

I would collaborate with my cooperating teacher, because I had no idea what I was doing, but if I would ask him other ways of approaching [instruction] or other ways people [teach a particular skill] he had no idea. I mean, he’d been teaching these things and no one else taught them, so it was kind of isolating.

As Central began to implement PLCs and the participants in the study began working first as a large departmental group and then in smaller groups the ways in which individuals interacted began to change. As one administrator stressed,

It was a very different conversation than I think some of us were used to having... Because curriculum in our district used to be [about gathering to discuss] what the ideal English curriculum would look like. And they’d spend a day and so everyone gets out their wish list. “Well I like to teach *this*...” But it’s not really what kids needed. It was creature-comforts for teachers.

Therefore prior to PLCs, although they felt supported by their peers and willingly shared the handouts and assessments they had created, ultimately the “what” and “how” of content and

assessment still resided with the individual teacher. Thus the introduction of professional learning communities served, in part, to shift the conversation from one of individual interests to shared goals.

As the PLC model was implemented teachers moved from an individually-constructed curriculum to the shared creation of learning targets and collaborative conversations aimed at identifying the essential content and skills which students would need to master to demonstrate proficiency within each course. Having worked early on to establish learning targets for each course, as teachers moved into vertically- and horizontally-aligned sub-groups in the most recent year conversations clearly centered on how to best teach, assess and modify instruction. One teacher, for instance, noted that her team, when teaching a co-created unit,

...came up with prompts that we would all use [and discussed how] we were going to make sure that we were all focusing on those prompts, talking about those things as we were going through the book. We came up with the rubric together, came up with the prompts together. And probably the best thing out of all of it was that at the end we... talked more about what we would have done differently.... [With lots of curricular shifts this year] a lot of our PLC time has been planning to try and teach it the same but at the end talking about what didn't work or what we would do and want to do differently next year.

Another teacher acknowledged a similar shift in approaching instruction and problems of practice and a need, supported by colleagues, to not simply identify an issue but rather collectively address it as a group.

It seemed like [before PLCs] we used to just say, "Ok, so we recognize that's a problem. Maybe we'll work on it a little bit more here or there." But now it's more like, "Ok,

that's the issue. Now, as a team, what are going to do with it? What pedagogy do you follow? And *then*, what professional development do we need?"

Participants saw such collaborative PLC work and conversations as being the most valuable when directly related to practice. According to one veteran teacher,

The best feedback occurs when the work you're doing is *real*. In other words, "I've got this issue in the classroom. How can it best be handled? Here's how my kids are doing or how they're not doing on this assessment or this lecture or with this work. What do you do?"

Collaborative approaches to the creation of shared lessons and assessments, the generation of shared rubrics and norming of student responses and conversations related to student proficiency all seemed to be results of engaging teachers in professional learning communities. One teacher participant noted, "I've just been reflecting on... the learning targets. To me that's all PLC and what am I *really* wanting them to know?" A more focused and shared curriculum supported by assessments aimed at measuring specific learning targets was a clear result of teachers having worked within PLC teams.

Furthermore, as PLCs helped bring teachers out of individual situations and decision-making and instead engaged them in weekly opportunities to dialogue about their teaching practice and modify instruction and establish shared criteria, such structural changes noticeably impacted both the amount of feedback which teachers had access to and the ways in which it was brought to them. Moreover, PLCs seemed to increase the desire of both educators and administrators to gather additional feedback so as to improve their practice and interact with the larger system in more sophisticated ways. PLC structures seemed to augment the short, informal and irregular conversations of the past, conversations which educators had to purposefully seek out. Instead, involvement in a professional learning community regularly *brought* feedback to

participants during structured times used to share concerns, examine data and learn from and with peers; both this feedback and the metacognitive awareness which other reporting structures within the PLC model required (see Theme #5) served as valuable information to consider as teachers questioned how to best modify their practice and increase student learning. Participants in Central's English Department, both veteran and early-career teachers, seemed to be willing to seek advice, when necessary, from colleagues prior to the arrival of professional learning communities. One veteran teacher, among others, explained, "I've always felt that if I had a question about something that I was doing... or just needed some type of feedback that I had that [and was never] afraid to go and ask for that help." Another department veteran took a similar approach, stating, "I sought out veteran teachers, teachers that I observed were really good... who had a reputation as a master teacher. So I sought those people out."

Although still leaving this opportunity for educators to seek out the advice of their peers, PLCs changed the ways in which feedback is received. No longer voluntary or relying solely on the individual's initiative, PLCs brought substantial feedback to teachers through collective mechanisms and on a regular basis; giving and receiving feedback became much more difficult to avoid. In PLCs educators found the work and thoughts of their peers brought to them in a formalized way and on a weekly basis. As one teacher explained, "My favorite part of PLC is just seeing what other people do for assignments. I was teaching *Macbeth* and [another teacher] was teaching *Macbeth*... [After my colleague shared an idea for an essay] I thought, 'I would have never thought of that.'" With the move to smaller groups educators found additional opportunities to gather feedback and improve student learning based on an increased opportunity to discuss individual students. One early-career teacher, a member of a team composed of vertically-aligned "essentials" classes, found that "all three of us teach 'essential' classes, however one is freshmen, one is sophomore, one is junior.... We know kids. I had essential kids last year that passed on to

teacher whoever. And I have some feedback. Who they are, what works for them.” Multiple participants commented on this ability to both better understand students and help them learn as well as the ways in which PLC structures, especially the Core Resource Center (CRC), worked to ensure student success. In one instance a teacher learned a student needed additional help and arranged time for them in the CRC to get extra support. After learning from the teachers in the CRC that the student was still struggling, however, the teacher worked with an administrator and the CRC teachers to create more individualized plan to meet the student’s learning needs. In the end the administrator suggested,

I think [this type of group intervention] *does* happen because we’re a PLC district. I think it *does* happen because people are used to talking about how are we going to help these kids learn and what do we do and those kinds of things; I think that does come from that.

Having the knowledge and advice of their colleagues brought to them on a weekly basis, participants came to realize that struggles do not need to be faced alone and feedback is readily and regularly available. One early-career teacher noted,

I can totally see if you’re not in a PLC environment you have no reason to be pulled out of your world, to ask those questions. You just kind of figure it out on your own. You just think that you have to do that. Here [at Central] you don’t feel that pressure that you have to figure it out by yourself. There are other resources.... With the PLC you understand that your colleagues *have* answers for you and you’re supported in knowing that.

Professional learning communities made giving and receiving nonnegotiable and supported increased feedback and shared learning through system structures.

What is more, having been provided the opportunity to collaborate and learn with their peers, multiple participants in the study, both administrators and teachers, showed an increased desire for additional feedback, information which they hoped would help them further improve

their practice. For their part, administrators seemed to exhibit an increased desire to both participate with their administrative colleagues as well as receive additional feedback on their own performance. Although overseeing PLC work in their building, administrators saw little time for themselves to work collaboratively with their colleagues; one administrator suggested that although it is necessary to conduct business and relay information in administrative meetings, “I really see the need to have PLC time be focused on the PLC *process*... and systemic challenges.” Additionally administrators, like other educators, seemed to want additional feedback directly related to their working context. Although receiving general feedback during an evaluation one administrator believed that the feedback

...wasn't as meaningful as I'd have wanted it to be, like, “You really need to improve this because this is where you're flawed,” and, “These are things you should maybe do next year that will help with that.” That's the type of feedback I'd want, but I don't often get that.

Teachers similarly seemed to desire additional feedback on their practice so as to improve their instruction. Required to collect, analyze, reflect upon instruction and report their findings each quarter, teacher participants would like, in addition to the feedback that they receive from their peers, to receive additional feedback from PLC coaches and the administration. As one early-career teacher explained,

I just feel like I'm giving documents, documents, documents. At the end of the year it's like, “Here's a year's worth of stuff.” What if they look back to quarter *one* and say, “Oh man. That's not good! You've got to...” Well, now it's way too late to do anything about it. So I'd like a little bit more feedback that way.

Teacher's likewise seemed to desire additional feedback from the system and considered ways in which they could interact with and learn from other PLC teams throughout Central High.

Realizing that all teachers were collecting data, reflecting on their practice, and generating meeting minutes for each PLC meeting one teacher noted,

I know it's there, I just don't know where it necessarily goes... [and there are] only certain people that *know*... I feel like *everybody* should know... I would read the minutes. And I would like to know how that happens so that I can give input.

Ways in which the system could further supplement the feedback provided in weekly PLC meetings were mentioned by numerous participants (see Theme #5). In the end, however, the implementation of professional learning communities at Central seemed to both increase the amount of feedback which members of the English Department had brought to them on a regular basis and heightened their desire to gather further data and receive additional feedback which could help positively impact their instruction and improve student learning.

Discussion within the context of the literature. The experiences of participants paint a clearer picture of the processes often mentioned in the literature, supporting a view that professional learning communities can be used to reduce isolation and strengthen collaboration through more frequent feedback. What is more, this study indicates that once educators have worked within such a system their desire for additional feedback is increased as they seek to further improve their practice. The educators involved in this study, especially those with longer histories in the district, repeatedly relayed experiences that, prior to the introduction of Central's professional learning community model, indicated that curricular goals and content were largely of their own design, even in multi-section classes. Although others happily offered advice when it was sought, the generation and instruction of these materials resided in the hands of the individual teacher with little systemic input or oversight. However the introduction of PLCs, the group dialogue which it fostered and the enhanced ability of administrators to informally monitor group progress placed the participants in a more collaborative environment. Central's professional

learning community model made learning targets and assessments both the purview of the entire department and those closest to the work being done in individual courses; such changes seem aligned with the current literature. Unlike the isolated systems which so many describe (see Darling-Hammond, 2010; Elmore, 2004; DuFour, DuFour & Eakers, 2008; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009), PLCs have provided Central's teachers with a structured system through which they have "access to the ideas, materials, strategies and talents" of their colleagues (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). As a result of Central's PLC arrangement, the opportunities to regularly dialogue with their peers and the feedback which these processes supported, the teacher participants in this study seemed to demonstrate an improved focus on shared learning targets and how to universally assess them, ensuring that all students were working toward curricular expectations. Darling-Hammond (2010) noted that "The more expert and experienced teachers there are in a school, the more professional knowledge they can share and bring to bear on making good curriculum decisions... [thereby improving] the cumulative effects of good teaching" (pp. 49-50). Keagan and Leahy (2001) have suggested that such collaborative work helps move dialogue from the language of complaint to the language of commitment, from individual assumptions to assumptions collectively held and from constructive criticism to deconstructive criticism. The experiences of participants in this study serve as clear examples of such transformations and have led to shared learning targets and common assessments which are used, much as Kanold, Toncheff and Douglass (2008) describe, "as a diagnostic tool to inform quality instruction and determine needs for student intervention" (p. 26). Such work seems clearly connected to the work of professional learning communities at Central High and was a clear theme as participants described their PLC experiences.

Furthermore, it is clear that such feedback played a vital role in helping participants reflect critically upon their practice. As Barth (2006) suggests and the experiences of participants

support, professional learning communities can, indeed, nurture “collegial relationships” in which educators share their individual practice, learn with their peers and modify practice based on various forms of feedback. Harris and Lambert (2003) likewise note that in PLCs “information will come to teachers in both formal (data and evidence) and informal (feedback loop conversations) ways [and that] consequently opportunities to discuss and reflect are imperative if progress is to be made” (p. 32). Participants frequently commented on the ways in which the feedback they had received from their peers, especially when closely tied to their teaching context, had led them to reconsider their work and modify practice.

Finally, although little mention is made in the present literature, the experiences of participants also suggest that once educators have become aware of the benefits of increased systemic feedback for their practice their desire for further information from other parts of the system may increase. Understanding that these changes were a result of their interactions with colleagues and that, because of reporting mechanisms established within Central’s PLC structure, other opportunities to receive feedback on their practice existed in the system, participants frequently pondered how feedback loops might be improved. Just as the implementation of their professional learning community model had brought information to teachers instead of requiring that they seek it out for themselves, participants considered how systemic structures might broaden the types of available feedback regularly at their disposal. Darling-Hammond (2010), for one, suggests that frequent access to the feedback of others may lead to an increased “desire to continuously develop more effective practices” (p. 229). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) likewise suggest that involvement in a professional learning community holds the potential to help educators develop “an unrelenting commitment to gather the facts and information necessary to make more informed and intelligent decisions, and to keep pace with new evidence and use the new facts to update practices” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 14). The experiences of participants

reinforce these beliefs and suggest that systems should carefully consider how to best provide educators with the multiple forms of feedback educators seek to help foster teacher learning and improve instructional practice.

Theme #3: Shifting from Content and Coverage to Student Learning and Instructionally Sensitive Data

One of the most profound impacts which teachers experienced with the move to professional learning communities involved a philosophical shift from a focus on the content to be taught and the material to be covered to a more highly concentrated focus on student learning supported by relevant and instructionally sensitive data and reflected in reporting mechanisms. When asked about collaborative practices prior to adopting the PLC model participants' comments centered almost exclusively on the content that they taught as well as the assignments and lessons that they had shared. One veteran teacher, for instance, noted that although colleagues have traditionally been helpful that help largely manifested itself in the sharing of files. Help, they suggested, "was more, 'Here's the way things work. These are the materials that I've used or we've used in the past. This is what's available to you.'" Another teacher recalled similar experiences.

I would look at the curriculum, I would see who else taught the particular unit in the curriculum that I wanted to teach ... and I would ask them how they went about doing it. And they would share materials with me. And then I would use their materials and we would talk about modifications.

Prior to establishing professional learning communities this concern with what material was to be covered and how it could be taught seemed to reinforce a focus more on what teachers were teaching than on what students were necessarily learning. Both administrators expressed frustration over the resistance of some teachers, not solely within the English department, to

transition to an emphasis on the specific skills and learning targets a course or unit was to address and what sources of feedback teachers would use to know that students were or were not being successful. One administrator stressed that in an English class, for example, the focus of PLC work is

not [to be] talking about content. I don't care what book you're reading; it doesn't matter what book you're reading. [The focus should be on] talking about whatever skill it is you're focused on.... Are you focusing on the writing process and a writing prompt? What is the skill that you think should be measured at the end of your semester? It's not the content.... We're really trying to get [teachers] to reduce the expanse of what they do [down] to these learning targets and not feel that they have to cover every chapter in their book or not even *use* their book.... We're focusing much more clearly on improving student learning for more students.

The other administrator frequently made similar statements, insisting that the focus of teachers' PLC work should be to help each student understand the key insights of the discipline, not discreet and memorized facts, and ensure that students thoroughly understand and can apply these concepts in a changing world. Such a move, said the second administrator, would take a large shift in teachers' thinking. As they put it,

I think the big message that people need to understand [with PLCs] is you're never done. It's not finite... I think the farther we get away from "what I had been doing" to "it's always changing" the better or the smoother it will be. Every year is going to be a different year and you may or may not be able to use what you did before.... I mean, I've been in [teaching for years] and I remember those conversations where you reuse, reuse, have your files, all those kinds of things.... That's just not reality. But for people who

were trained underneath that it's like, "Why can't it be any more?" Well, because it's just not.

Though most definitely related to the quality of instruction, this heightened awareness that student learning, not necessarily a strict adherence to specific content, should be at the center of teacher practice seemed a clear result of teachers' involvement in professional learning communities. As one veteran teacher suggested,

Since PLCs... it seems like there's more of a focus on the students, and that's not just a cliché. It *is* more of a focus on students rather than teaching practice. Obviously they go hand in hand. I mean, we always seek out the best practices and best ways.... But now it seems like it's not so much about, "Well what do you do for this? Here's my folder." It's more incorporating the data too and what's working for students. It's almost like a *philosophical* change.

PLCs, it seems, helped study participants shift the focus from, "What is taught?" to "What have students learned?" and engage in questions that ultimately would help them answer, "How do we best know?" based on specific forms of feedback.

As participants worked in various professional learning community teams and the structures which supported their collaborative learning evolved around them participants seemed to modify their practice, focusing on instructionally sensitive data to help them more accurately monitor and report student learning. One teacher, for instance, recalls that prior to PLCs they might

keep a running informal track [of student errors such as,] "Kids use a lot of passive voice. Kids use a lot of inappropriate work choices," just to see where [instruction] was.... So was it data analysis? Eh. It was very sketchy data analysis because did I include every student? No.

In a related fashion another teacher remembers counting the number of As, Bs, Cs, etc. in the class but “did not look at it as intensely and for every assessment like we do now.” Seeing this change as a positive the teacher noted that PLC work has led to a closer monitoring of student learning. As one veteran teacher concluded, “What PLC added was the data bit.... That data part of it was a definite plus that had not occurred prior to PLCs.”

Having heightened their awareness of the importance of examining student data and being required by administration to ensure that grades reflected student learning not behavioral issues, PLCs led educators in search of relevant data and feedback which could help them identify when a student had not learned a concept and remediation was necessary. For one early-career teacher involvement in PLCs “shifted our conversations from, ‘How did you do this lesson?’ or, ‘What cool things could I do?’ to, ‘How do I get the best results?’ In a sense that’s what [we’re] looking for, essentially.” As a result participants in the study sought out and ultimately began a more systematic approach to analyzing student data for evidence of learning. For all educator participants this included the administration and analysis of multiple standardized tests as required by the district. For instance in AP Literature the two teachers for the course administered batteries of practice tests and then, according to one of the instructors,

...looked at deficits in student learning in almost a scientific approach... to remediate that issue and then show the change, show where it was before, how we fixed it, explain how we fixed it, fix it, and then show where we’re at in the end. So I’ve noticed a much more concentrated effort on eliminating these problems through teamwork, through different methods, and then employing the strategies and then looking at the change over time in student learning.

Although all teacher participants administered and spent time analyzing various types of highly quantitative student data from external standardized tests others responsible for different student

populations were concerned that, while sometimes informative, relying solely on this external quantitative data as an indication of student learning might not be a completely accurate measure.

During the focus group discussion a veteran teacher shared the following:

I teach the opposite end of the spectrum most of the day. I teach essentials, I teach seniors who are technical school bound, so there are some college bound, but I also have a lot that are going directly into work or the military or whatever. And most of my kids don't care about anything. They don't *care* about AP tests, they don't *care* about ACT scores.... And for *me*, like [another teacher] was saying... we're giving the TABE, we're giving the SRI, we're giving the practice ACT and their scores go up and down all year long. You have *no* idea whether you are accomplishing anything.

This statement resonated with another teacher who soon added,

It's really hard to look at that [lower] end of the spectrum and use all that testing and say that's how you're going to gauge whether or not you're succeeding... I have students come straight out and tell me, "I didn't care; I was filling in bubbles...."

All participants, however, agreed that a sharpened focus on student learning as evidenced by relevant data was a key benefit to professional learning communities. As one veteran teacher suggested,

["Scientific" data is] fine.... You do get that feedback on specifically what you maybe didn't do as well or what the kids were not getting. You know, that's great.... [But] we need to be careful and look at the *kinds* of students that you're teaching...[and not] *just* look at numerical data.

Regardless of the data used the shift in emphasis to concepts students have learned, not material teachers have covered, was clearly tied to the implementation of PLCs. One participant, finding that they and their colleagues were doing more frequent in-class checking in addition to analyzing

the shared common formative and summative assessments, made it clear that the questions most relevant to their practice had changed. No longer tied to specific content this teacher found themselves asking,

What do [students] know and what don't they know? And what do I do if they don't know it? And what do I do if half the class does and half the class doesn't? ... I find myself more and more trying to stay attuned to where they are *every day*.

This attention to student learning seems a clear result of an ongoing dialogue with peers, the feedback and insight they provide, and the data analysis and reflection encouraged and required by Central's current PLC model.

Finally, as the district and participants wrestled with this seeming shift in focus other changes, mandated by the district, ensured that student grades were likewise reflective of student learning. Having spent time in PLC groups working on common formative and summative assessments and having shifted the focus of teacher work to measuring student learning, teachers still wrestled with an administrative policy which required that 80 percent of students' final grades in a course must be tied to summative assessments not formative work or behavioral or attendance rules. One teacher, his comments supported by numerous other participants as a focus group discussion unfolded, noted,

Look at summative assessments, though. They now make the bulk up of [student grades]. Our administrators have told it doesn't matter if kids do their homework. They've told us this... It doesn't matter if kids do their homework? ... And they *have* said to us, *literally*, "Your job is *not* to teach them responsibility.... Your job is to teach them *content* mastery." And they wanted to make that so clear that they said, "In fact, we're going to mandate a policy that your *tests* are the only thing that matters."

Although teacher participants seemed to understand the importance of shifting their attention from what is taught to what is learned and had created their own common formative and summative assessments based on established learning targets, integrating this type of instructional feedback and applying those ideas to long-held grading practices appeared difficult. Though still finding it challenging to embrace this adjustment to grading practices, however, others recognized how it aligned with other professional learning community priorities. Explaining the evolution of their thinking one veteran teacher shared,

When I first started I felt like, and it was I think a pretty common belief that... you teach the material and if you do a good job with it a student should be able to learn from it... and if they do their work and they come to class they'll be fine. And they'll do well... I used to grade homework [and the shift to focusing almost all points on summative assessments is] a *huge* philosophical change, I think. And yet I know kids can copy in the hallway. I know that there are things going on at home that prevent kids from doing their work. I know all of that. But before I seemed more removed from that concern.... You know, I understand that the grade should reflect *knowledge*, not whether or not a student turns in work.

Still in its early stages and ever evolving, the teachers of Central's English department, supported by the vision and work of PLCs and the collaborative feedback of their peers, have clearly begun revisioning their role as educators. Moving from what has been taught to what has been learned, using data to substantiate these findings and adjust their practice as needed, and wrestling with how they might embrace reporting structures which highlight student learning all seem tied to a substantial shift in focus which PLCs have supported.

Discussion within the context of the literature. The implementation of a professional learning community clearly changed the emphasis of educational practice for the study's

participants, encouraging both teachers and administrators alike to reprioritize professional development around teacher and student learning instead of simply covering content. All participants, in one way or another, referenced how time spent together had transformed from the simple sharing of materials or unstructured review of assessments to a more complex and rigorous examination of their teaching and of student learning as evidenced by relevant data. This refocusing of their priorities and their desire for data to inform their findings align with the work of DuFour et al. (2008) who have found that in professional learning communities educators “work together interdependently and assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students... [and are] hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential” (p. 18). Participants repeatedly suggested that Central’s PLC structures were responsible for the newfound focus on relevant data as a way of indicating student learning. Although the participants, because of their varied teaching and student contexts, disagreed as to which assessment data were the most reliable, all agreed that the assessment and the data provided should be relevant to the unique teaching situation. Popham (2006) would suggest that participants are indicating a desire for assessments that are “instructionally sensitive” (p. 351), ones that have a small number of highly relevant learning targets which are clearly described, are applicable to the instruction students have received, help educators understand exactly what students do and do not know, and provide results in a timely manner so that educators can modify instruction and ensure all students are learning the necessary concepts. The participants in the study seemed to recognize, supported by PLC structures, that they needed instructionally sensitive data as they analyzed student learning. As a result they sought to balance the ways in which anecdotal data, formative and summative class assessments of their own design and external assessments could best inform their practice and assist them in ensuring student success. Such work aligns with the suggestions of Harris (2011) who notes that “The best PLCs

use data in ways that *inform* but do not *drive* judgments about practice” (p. 168; emphasis in original). Though in the beginning stages of truly making data meaningful, study participants at Central High School were engaged in PLC work which focused on mutually agreed upon learning targets, assessments which provided meaningful feedback and evidence of student growth, and modifying instruction as necessary in light of their findings, a focus that Schmoker (2011) would suggest will improve student learning. Participants, supported by PLC structures and the continual feedback of their peers, seem to be embracing a philosophical shift; as a result the core of their professional development experience has moved from covering content to ensuring that both teachers and students are continually learning.

Theme #4: Considering Feedback and Power Implications when Mandating Structures, Increasing Transparency and Enhancing Accountability in PLC Systems

Participants clearly noted the importance of various applications and implications of power within the professional learning community. Their responses made it clear that PLC models should carefully consider how power is used when mandating changes, increasing transparency and enhancing accountability so as to positively impact the system and improve feedback mechanisms.

As administrator and teacher participants reflected upon the role of feedback on their practice they often related how the power of their superiors had been or potentially could be applied to both positively and negatively impact their practice. Both administrator participants clearly recognized their role in mandating certain aspects of the professional learning community model as it was implemented and as it evolved. However they likewise recognized that potential mandates from the superintendent that impact their own interaction with various system features might further improve their use of and response to feedback. Feeling a responsibility to enhance teacher and student learning at Central High, the administrators mandated multiple changes. One

of the most important, they felt, was the reassignment of “core” teachers’ “duty” responsibility. At the administrators’ directions teachers were moved from overseeing time in a study hall to actively working with students in the new Core Resource Center (CRC) to help struggling students meet established learning targets. Stressing that prior to PLCs too many students were failing and there were not the resources to continually offer repeat sections of required courses, the administrators mandated a change in the way in which student learning would be remediated and the responsibilities which core teachers had to ensure student success. As one administrator recalls,

We had to be top-down with it.... It met great resistance initially because it was like teaching an extra class. [Core teachers] were exhausted, they really were. We were whipping the thoroughbreds, so to speak. They have adjusted to that. They all saw... The data showed them the validity of what they were doing. We reduced F’s by 80% and it wasn’t just changing the grading scale; we were attacking student learning and making a difference. Even though it exhausted them the core teachers know that it was beneficial.

Though many teacher participants felt as though their enhanced duty took away the precious little prep time that still remained in their daily schedules (see Theme # 5), administrators viewed mandating this change to CRCs as critical to reinforcing Central’s focus on student learning even though they knew such changes would unsettle some teachers. As the other administrator recalls,

When we started Core Resource Center for the first semester I think staff would have willingly burned me at the stake, [but in the end the] Core Resources Center has also changed the culture of this school. And that’s a huge part of PLC... It answers that question of, “What do you do when [students] don’t learn?”

Administrators felt as though such mandates were key to helping teachers revise their roles to address PLC goals and enhance student learning.

However they also admitted that if improving teacher and administrator learning is truly at the heart of PLC work the superintendent should likewise insist that administrators more actively receive and provide feedback to the professional learning community groups within their buildings. As an example one administrator noted that although PLC coaches meet monthly with the curriculum directors there is little feedback between coaches and administration (see Theme #5).

There's not structural, systemic protocol for the feedback loop for administration.... If [PLC coaches] think that they're disseminating status data on their groups at their monthly meetings at night then [the district] should mandate that administration attend so that we know that it's substantial and essential.... If that meeting is important, then we should be told it's important and then we should be mandated to attend.... If that's part of the feedback loop then it needs to systemically be articulated and demanded and insisted upon.

Both administrators clearly understood the power that they held and their responsibility to mandate changes to the PLC system when necessary so as to enhance student and teacher learning. What is more, they acknowledged ways in which their practice might be improved if they were directed to more purposefully interact with the feedback available in the system and challenged to utilize that information to provide more detailed and meaningful feedback to their staff.

For their part, teacher participants acknowledged that mandates from the administration had both enhanced their practice and the professional learning of their peers while at the same time increasing their frustration when the work generated because of such mandates seemed to receive little acknowledgement or feedback from the administration. PLC structures, one teacher

noted, and the ability of the administration to demand that teachers participate most definitely changed the way in which they approached working with others.

We were, and I use this word lightly, *forced* to be there; it's part of our contract. Would I spend as much time with the people I do without that? No.... That time, it's there every Tuesday, 45-50 minutes and we know it's coming [so] I'll make mental notes about what I want to talk about in PLC.

A veteran teacher, similar to many other participants, highlighted that although some PLC structures have put additional strains on the available time, the fact that the administration insists on requiring the work is needed to ensure improvement throughout the district.

I do not chafe under the PLC expectations.... I think that I've always been a PLC type of teacher. And so has it improved our district in the post-PLC environment? Has it helped our district? Yes. Because I think all teachers have not been PLC teachers in the past.

At the same time, however, teacher participants likewise often exhibited a frustration with PLC mandates and requirements, especially those being implemented in the current school year. They saw these requirements as feedback which could potentially benefit their practice and yet which often was late in coming or fell short of their expectations (see Theme #2). At times, one teacher stated,

It just seems like one mandate after another as far as what's to be done and what type of paperwork is to be filed without any sort of reflection upon that from anyone that's wanting these things.... So we keep on being told that we need to *do* certain things, kind of go through steps and file paperwork and reflections and documentation, but we have not formally ever received any sort of feedback on those sorts of things.

One veteran teacher felt overwhelmed by the mandated reporting requirements and was further frustrated because, after completing reports, there was a lack of administrative feedback. This

teacher felt that “[Administrators were] the ones who wanted [teachers] to generate all this data. They had the list of all the things we should do at the beginning of the year. I saw that list, I almost fainted. And for what?” Ultimately teacher participants recognized the power of the administration to refocus their work so as to improve the collective practice of the school’s teachers but were also often frustrated by mandates which held the potential for growth but which received little meaningful feedback. Such systems, the teacher participants seemed to warn, should only mandate aspects of professional learning communities which can effectively gather and consistently provide feedback to educators on the required work so that all involved see it as a meaningful addition to their practice.

Although it was clearly evident that professional learning communities increased both individual and group transparency within the system, the unequal distribution of power in buildings and within departments made some participants hesitant to fully engage in the process and expose professional development needs. One administrator viewed some educators at Central as being intimidated by PLCs because of the increased transparency inherent in the model.

We talk [in PLC] about tearing the scab off... because we have some pretenders and you’re exposed in this system. People see what you’re doing... when you’re comparing common summatives and common formatives. You’re revealed and some can’t handle that and hide from that and you discover that and I think that’s really good.

The other administrator similarly agreed that PLCs heightened others’ awareness of their colleagues’ practice and learning. According to the second administrator “The PLC model has opened up people’s practice and opened them up to having the conversation. And I think, for some people, it’s easier to have the conversation and share and be more open and transparent.” Teacher participants definitely felt this tension, aware that they and their practice were under increased examination from their peers. While those who teach multiple sections of the same

course might collectively gather, analyze and reflect upon data others, because of their teaching situation, complete these tasks for a class in which they are the only teacher. This more transparent examination of practice by those with power, a veteran teacher suggested, “makes some people nervous.... If you teach a singleton, you know? [Or if they] don’t have someone that [they] share these assessments with... they [can] just feel like an island sometimes.” This increased scrutiny as a result of PLCs, meant to help improve educator and thus student learning, is central to the PLC model, though perceived imbalances of power, even within departments, can further intensify the stress which some teachers feel. One early-career teacher, for example, shared,

As a new teacher I’ve been extremely stressed about presenting and being the best teacher that I can... [and during PLC meetings] basically I feel like it’s almost reporting to my colleagues versus sharing sometimes, because I’m new; I feel like I’m at the judgment table sometimes.... because *I* didn’t want to be perceived as not doing my job. Because when I failed I felt like, “Oh no! All of my kids just failed this vocab and I have no idea why but I have to go to PLC and ask them for advice and I’m scared.” I would do it, but I’m scared.

Considering how to increase transparency while creating structures which contemplate the impact of various power dynamics present in a system is important if PLCs are to encourage the open sharing of practice. Such systems actively encourage trust (see Theme #1) to encourage positive and open interactions.

Finally, as systems seek to balance such considerations of power participants acknowledged that various aspects of Central’s PLC system and the feedback which it makes available hold teachers accountable to a higher standard of practice and to improving student learning. Numerous statements by teacher participants stressed the ways in which PLCs enhanced

responsibility for individual student learning. One early-career teacher suggested that accountability has been changed through the “assessments that we have to submit and the reflections because you actually have to look at *every* single question and what learning does this tie to and when did I teach it.” Another teacher concurred, noting that PLC reporting requirements “*forced* me to become a better teacher because I was gathering data and thinking that that would be part of my evaluation as a teacher.” Multiple participants seemed to suggest that this shift in focus increased personal accountability first before branching out to other systemic structures. One veteran teacher felt as though teachers were “being forced to reflect, but it will teach us how to do it naturally along the line,” and another pointed out that PLC structures had teachers continually think about, “Am I meeting my learning targets? Am I reaching all areas of learning abilities? Do I have common assessments?” As this accountability moved outward teachers discussed the use of checklists within PLC groups and the addition of coaches, both ways in which the system was changed in the year under study. The reporting in these situations, one teacher felt, was “less for us and more for administration to know that we’re actually doing something.” One veteran teacher highlighted the point that the recent changes in reporting structures had been used to make teacher learning more concrete and tangible. According to this teacher “people feel like they’ve always been reflective and in-tune with what their students’ needs are and what they’re doing... [but they’ve been] doing it in that way that really there’s [been] no evidence of data or reflection.” When coupled with the increased transparency created by PLC systems the added accountability, especially in light of historic cuts to education in the state which have caused Central to slash millions of dollars from school budgets, has increased teachers’ concerns over personnel cuts and the data they can point to as evidence of student growth. Though sometimes a difficult shift one veteran teacher noted,

It's just good professionalism. But I think also, to be honest... Since PLC has been a part of the district I think teachers think in that fashion more than they maybe did. It's definitely put people's feet to the fire. For good or for bad I think that the message to teachers is, "Hey, you are accountable." And so I think we tend to *think* in terms of PLC more than we used to.

These changes in attitude and practice, emphasized through the PLC model and enforced through the power dynamics at Central, led teachers to more carefully consider their responsibility as educators for addressing student learning.

Administrators likewise saw the way in which PLC structures could be used to enhance and enforce accountability, understanding that improving the collective capacity of the educators throughout the building was the only way to truly improve student learning. One administrator suggested that coming to terms with increased accountability "works for people who trust in PLC and who trust in the model" but that those who do not trust PLC structures struggle under the model. Many teachers, the administrator went on to stress, are comfortable under the old and infrequent clinical supervision model and feel that accountability "should just be about what [the teacher] tells [the administrator teaching] is about when [an administrator] comes and observes them and [the teacher is] on their best game that day." Though comfortable for many teachers, administrators felt that this clinical supervision model did not help improve teaching practice. Therefore although the added transparency embraced by PLC structures "scares the hell" out of some teachers the administrators saw such accountability as critical to improving the collective practice of educators. What is more, seeing as data collection, reflection and analysis are submitted each quarter both individually and in potential PLC groups it makes it more difficult for teachers who are not as committed to the process to cheat the system. When this systemic feedback indicates that a teacher is not working closely with their peers or is not focused on

student learning action must be taken. Both administrators indicated that other teachers in multiple PLC groups had come forward at various times in the past school year and shared with their PLC coach or with the administrators the ways in which their colleague's deviation had negatively impacted group goals and student learning. In one such instance one administrator, sharing the need to hold a teacher from a science PLC team accountable and redirect the group, noted that "They're one of the most functional PLCs that I have now simply because that curriculum is tight." The other administrator suggested that such circumstances need to be addressed; far from doing damage or being viewed as tattling on a colleague, such accountability to peers and the administration ensures that the quality of instruction improves for all students. In this administrator's opinion, "the PLC process has helped [Central move up] that continuum where there was *no* structure, there was *no* accountability, there was *no* alignment of grading practices, of curriculum, of sequence... And now there is a much tighter alignment." As the same administrator stressed, "they're in PLC and they're working with colleagues all the time, so [we should] measure that or quantify their effectiveness working together and [tie that to] how students are achieving." In the end both administrators and teachers in the study recognized the importance of holding educators accountable for their individual and collective practice, and applying pressure when necessary to guarantee that teacher learning and practice and student performance improve.

Discussion within the context of the literature. As professional development was revised and PLC structures evolved the teacher and administrator participants at Central High, like much of the current literature suggests, came face to face with the implications of both distributing power and mandating performance. Although PLC structures were used to bring teachers together around issues of practice and teachers could use this time as they wished as long as specified tasks were ultimately completed, administrators sometimes found it necessary to

mandate certain aspects of Central's overall PLC approach. Seeing the importance of having a systemic intervention when students were not learning, administrators used their power to mandate teacher participation in the new Core Resource Center. Such actions, Fullan (2010a) would suggest, align with others working to build "individual and collective capacity. This [work is] not invitational; it [is] presented as nonnegotiable" (p. 51). The administrators in the study also recognized that the superintendent is similarly responsible for molding district PLC structures and might enhance feedback within the system by mandating further participation on the part of the administrators (Lambert, 2003; Harris & Lambert, 2003). Sometimes feeling out of the loop, requiring the attendance of administrators at PLC coaches meetings, they felt, would improve their ability to provide feedback to coaches and teachers in their building, actions which DuFour et al. (2008) suggest. The teacher participants in the study, although recognizing the importance of mandating certain PLC structures to ensure that all teachers in the system were learning themselves and focused on improving student learning, also voiced frustration over certain reporting structures which were mandated but which received little meaningful feedback. As previously discussed, teacher participants seemed to desire additional feedback that could help them improve their practice. In this instance teachers voiced frustration with mandated reporting mechanism which, as they experienced it, put added demands on their limited time and yet were largely unacknowledged by the administration. Under such circumstances teachers felt they were not provided with timely or instructionally sensitive feedback consistent with the writings of Popham (2006) which could improve teacher and student learning. Harris and Lambert (2005) note that building and district administrators need to provide "support [which] includes staff development and offering evaluative feedback" (p. 205). Those who create and oversee PLC structures, it seems, should carefully consider the use of mandates and systemic responses to required work so that top-down features are seen as mutually beneficial.

As the literature suggests, PLC systems should likewise carefully consider the implications of power mismatches and their impact on teacher performance as transparency increases within the system, carefully supporting teachers as they learn to work in a seemingly new environment. Having moved from a system in which the goals, content, and assessment of student performance were the responsibility of an individual teacher into one in which such work is expected to be openly shared, some teachers struggled with the increased transparency. Because of power imbalances both within their department and between teachers and the administration, teacher participants sometimes worried about how others might respond to seeming deficiencies in their practice. Establishing a trusting and supportive environment, as previously discussed, is essential in such circumstances (Brookfield, 1987). Furthermore, if those working within professional learning communities are to be fully transparent, systems should embrace what Elmore (2004) calls “reciprocal accountability” (p. 93), a concept which calls on others to simultaneously provide resources and expertise that build each individual’s instructional capacity every time they demand an increase in teacher performance. By creating trusting systems which support individual and group needs professional learning communities can reduce teachers’ unease as the system moves toward more and more transparent structures.

Finally, study participants seemed to recognize the power of the current PLC system and the importance of holding all teachers accountable for demonstrating teacher and student learning. Teacher learning should be demonstrated in both the individual practice of teachers as well as in the larger systemic learning of the district. Commenting repeatedly on how they had been forced to analyze and reflect upon individual data as a part of the most recent revision to PLC structures, teachers expressed a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability for student learning. Participants saw themselves as being first and foremost accountable to their students and their peers, and after that to the administration. According to the literature, when

placed in collaborative situations “adults in the organization [come to] frame their responsibilities in terms of their contributions to enhancing someone else’s capacity and performance” (Elmore, 2004, p. 83). These changes create cultures which “are demanding when it comes to results, and the demand is telling because it is peer based and up-close on a daily basis” (Fullan, 2005, p. 20). Participants recognized that PLC structures held all educators responsible, that demonstrations of student and teacher learning should be evidence-based and that, when necessary, individuals should be redirected to meet the collective goals of the system. As Fullan (2010a) notes, “Every policy, strategy, and action [within a system] should be designed and experienced in a way that automatically and relentlessly reminds people every day that education reform is a matter of moral purpose of utmost importance to us individually and collectively” (p. 63).

Theme #5: Critical Considerations in Systemic Structures: Fostering Collaboration not Isolation, Making Feedback Meaningful in the Near and Long Terms to Individuals and Systems, and the Allocation of Time.

Although participants suggested that PLC structures, the addition of PLC coaches and the move to vertically- and horizontally-aligned teams brought more focused feedback to the system, participants also noted that these changes simultaneously heightened their sense of isolation from others and thus potentially removed other sources of information which would have brought added value. Participants throughout the study were quick to express the ways in which using PLC coaches had positively impacted the system. For example, whereas one veteran teacher felt that there

...was a definite disconnect [in the feedback loop between teachers and the administration in the past he believed it] was rectified *this* year with the advent of PLC coaches... The teams were given *much* better direction this year in regard to what we were to do on a weekly basis.

Administrators likewise viewed the impact of PLC coaches in a favorable light. According to one administrator “It was *huge* to get coaches; that’s a big plus. That gives the teachers a mandated feedback loop to the coach that is attended to.” Other systemic changes, including the move to horizontally- and vertically-aligned teams likewise brought teachers together around more focused conversations of practice, an improvement over the larger departmental arrangement of the past. However these same structures, it seems, simultaneously served to isolate some participants and cut them off from additional sources of valuable feedback. For instance, although the addition of PLC coaches may have created a clearer feedback loop between teachers and their coaches one administrator felt too far removed from the work teachers were completing. According to that administrator “There’s a lack of feedback from the coaches to administration [which has left me feeling] disengaged from the process right now.... [Teachers are] getting good feedback, they’re having feedback occur, but... there’s nothing coming to administration unless it’s informal.” Wishing to be more involved the administrator would like to see more formalized feedback loops established in the system’s structures to enhance dialogue and understanding about the work being done and stressed that when it came to the PLC coaches in the building, “I want an individual conversation with them.”

In a similar fashion teacher participants noticed how the shifts to vertically- and horizontally-aligned teams and the additional reporting mechanisms established with the help of PLC coaches both made clearer feedback available to them and yet also isolated them from their colleagues. Although the smaller teams gave participants shared items to create, discuss and analyze (see Theme #2) teachers almost unanimously highlighted that they no longer had opportunities to meet as an entire English department, something which removed voices and conversations from their reflections on practice. One early-career teacher, for instance, shared that, “I don’t see everyone in my department now; we meet in our mini-teams. So there’s

someone who I saw *every* day last year who I don't *ever* see." Another veteran teacher, echoing the concerns of others, noted that although PLCs are meant to bring teachers together some structures have worked to, if not purposefully keep them apart, at least not facilitated additional collaboration; "that comment has been made among educators this year," the teacher shared, "that, 'I've never felt so isolated from my department.'" Therefore while focused teams may have sharpened some collegial advice it has eliminated other feedback from the picture. As another teacher described it,

That balance [between focused small groups and opportunities to meet with others in the department] is so important because if you're with the same people over and over and over the perspectives [can] get monotonous.... [A different departmental colleague] might come in and say something *completely* different because [they've] been teaching *completely* different classes for a different length of time with different experience under [their] belt... and might see it totally differently and say something profound that could really [change] the way I see things versus getting stuck in that rut.

In the end, the experiences of participants point to the need for systems to focus teachers on work closely tied to their teaching context while at the same time considering ways in which varied viewpoints can remain available so that additional feedback and the larger departmental vision can remain shared and intact. Summarizing the current situation one teacher concluded, "We feel like mini-islands. And I love my team and I think my team is very high-functioning. And I have *no idea* what [others] are doing." In planning the various ways in which professional learning communities are structured, therefore, teacher participants seemed to encourage systems to consider the implications of various team arrangements and implement approaches which give teachers access to those who best know their context while simultaneously keeping them connected to the collective work and shared vision of the group.

The comments of participants also pinpointed the need for systems to carefully consider how to create and support structures which make feedback meaningful first to the individual educator and then to more and more distanced members of the system. From the onset PLCs should encourage metacognitive practices, use structures which gather and share information with multiple parts of the system and receive timely and constructive feedback, and create ways in which systemic learning can be stored and shared in the near and long terms to enhance teacher and student learning.

Beyond the weekly interactions and shared collaborative endeavors Central High's PLC system utilized individual teacher reflection tied to the analysis of student data to support the metacognitive practices of teachers. One administrator indicated that teachers were asked to complete a chart

...where they would fill out, "Did this research. This was the impact it had on my practice. Collaborated with this person. Impact on practice." So [teachers] always had to be thinking, "What am I doing and how does it impact my practice?"

The PLC process, it seemed, helped foster this internalization and reflection. Responding to whether or not that reflection was valuable even if it was not shared with another one early-career teacher responded, "When I personally put in more than is just required of me, yes [it is of value]. I do graphs and charts and stuff that I don't even turn in. That's been fostered because of this process." Having been supported in ways which encourage and require regular reflection on practice, participants saw potential value to larger reporting mechanisms, though they felt improvements in disseminating information to PLC coaches and administrators in ways that allowed for a more focused and timely response would benefit teacher and student learning. Although acknowledging that PLC coaches were directed to serve largely in the role of information organizers and as communication links between PLC teams and the administration

the participants in the study expressed a desire for increased feedback, including from the PLC coach (see Theme #2). More importantly, because of the way in which the details of teachers' work were collected and shared, and because teachers and administrators alike felt as though the information received little feedback, participants suggested multiple enhancements to the system to improve communication, reflection and make feedback more meaningful. As one veteran teacher noted, when teachers sent along the materials and reflection for inclusion in the group binder at the end of each quarter these materials were arranged but were not passed on to the administration; instead they were simply marked off on a checklist. This teacher added that

...now [that binders are being passed on to the administration] at the end of the year, and again [with this] being the *first* year [with binders], I can imagine what it's like for administrators to go through those *binders*. And really they were just concerned about knowing about people who were *not* following this process.

Frustrated over the lack of timely feedback and wishing instead that their reflections could serve as a vehicle to help guide their practice in regular and meaningful ways throughout the year, teacher participants offered numerous ways in which the data could be shared with others in the department and throughout the school. Collectively teacher participants suggested: (a) storing, organizing and sharing information electronically instead of in the current paper format so that the information contained in the binders became both a short-term data point and a long-term example and guide to practice which could be accessed quickly; (b) considering ways in which PLC time could periodically be spent examining the reported analysis of peers and engaging in dialogues around these reflections; (c) using scheduling structures to allow coaches and team members to observe lessons that will be analyzed; and (d) considering additional rotations in the PLC schedule which might make it possible for administrators to review their work and offer oral or written feedback to the group early in the process so that adjustments can be made to

instruction. Purposefully addressing how both individuals and systems could better serve the short- and long-term needs of Central High's staff through PLC structures and create meaningful feedback loops figured prominently into the thoughts of study participants.

If there was a single unified message from study participants, however, as to how best support their work and allow them to truly focus on student learning it centered on a single word: time. Throughout the individual and focus group interviews both administrative and teacher participants continually expressed a willingness to look more deeply at their own practice and the practice of others, to move away from focusing on content and instead drill down and examine data so as to build a more complete understanding of student learning, and to modify their practice, both individually and collectively, to make teacher and student learning their chief priority. Though hoping future changes might alter their circumstances, the time necessary to successfully address these concerns was at the forefront of participants' minds. From the onset administrators acknowledged that the time necessary to meaningfully collect system-wide data and provide teachers with individual or small-group feedback was a challenge. Although feeling that the addition of PLC coaches has helped provide some feedback one administrator noted that when PLC team data came to the two administrators in the building "trying to go through all that paperwork and all that documentation was not... likely to happen." Even with the changes made in the present school year where six PLC coaches were charged with collecting data and two half-time curriculum directors were responsible for reviewing submissions and providing feedback to PLC teams and individual teachers, the time to create meaningful feedback loops which regularly impacted teacher practice seemed insufficient and came at a cost. While praising these changes the other administrator repeatedly referred to the foot-high stack of binders and evaluations which still needed to be reviewed as the end of the school year approached and the way in which this limited interactions with teachers. Struggling with these challenges the administrator shared,

I think [using coaches, binders and evaluations tied to PLCs] is the way we will go forward, but... The paperwork aspect of it... I'd like to be in more classrooms than I am because I like to be in classrooms and watch kids and teachers and do that... Logistically this year I can't... because [my current job is] basically two full-time positions.

What is more, Central's administrative team struggled with finding the time for themselves to actually function as a true professional learning community, often forced to choose between pulling together and learning as a small group or being present to monitor and provide feedback to teacher PLC teams. As one administrator noted,

...sometimes [the administrators will] steal some time during the PLC time when the teachers are doing it, but then I'm not getting around to see what they do. So sometimes [we'll circulate as teacher teams work] but other times we just grab the time ourselves.

Finding themselves struggling with how to best use the limited PLC time available to gather, reflect upon and provide meaningful feedback to their varied professional colleagues the administrators likewise acknowledged these same limitations on teacher time. As one administrator reflected upon the current small team system, they expressed that the school

...ran into issues with PLCs [this year because of] the time factor.... You get pretty much 40 minutes with your PLC team and in some ways they're still isolated. They're not coming together as a large department, they're coming together in teams to work on courses where they share a common course.... [So whereas some people share offices and have] these informal collaborations going *all the time*... other people who don't see each other during the day, don't share an office need [more of] that time together... and I think that's one of the battles that we will continue to face.

Noting that there is not enough time available, one administrator wrestled with how to best support the shared learning of PLC teams but justify the time by tying it to specific outcomes; as

they put it, “That’s been hard for teachers to say, ‘Well I just need more time.’ Ok, but to do what, though?” Administrators likewise acknowledged that changes to the system which support their professional learning community model, such as the move to the Core Resource Center, put additional strains on teachers’ time, replacing a relatively light supervision duty with a period in which they were highly active and engaged in helping students struggle with learning.

Furthermore, both administrators acknowledged that the additional work for PLC coaches limited their time further. According to one administrator the PLC coaches

...were key to it. They put in unbelievable amounts of time with meetings in the evening, PLC scheduled times, and then outside of the classroom collecting data, organizing artifacts. [What’s more they’re also teaching] which is problematic because you can’t give [PLC coaches] the time that they need.... You should pay them as well as give them a period off, but they just get pay. So it just piles more on.

Overall the two administrative participants interviewed in this study seemed to express both a desire for additional time for themselves so as to help them play a more effective role in Central’s professional learning communities as well as an understanding of how providing the teaching staff with additional time to engage in the work at hand could more fully support teacher and student learning.

Teacher participants also clearly struggled to find a balance between their desire to provide and receive additional feedback and effectively engage in PLC reporting requirements and the everyday and very real time constraints of their job. The educators involved in this study recognized the benefits of receiving feedback from peers and administrators and seemed to seek out additional feedback that might help them improve their practice (see Theme #2). At the same time, however, they felt that it was difficult to fully engage in all of the potential opportunities for

growth that PLCs provided seeing as those same PLC structures, as currently implemented, placed so many demands on their time. As one veteran teacher explained,

When I began at Central High School I taught five classes... and a study hall supervision. That went to six classes and a supervision... probably ten years into my tenure here at the high school. This is now the third year that we have the Core Resource Center where fulltime teachers have six classes and a Core Resource Center obligation [and as a result] the time that teachers have [on their own] to reflect, to talk, to meet... informally, even, is very much restricted.

Another teacher made a similar statement, noting that “we only have one prep and everything else is either class or duty, so our schedule isn’t really set up well to talk with other people [outside of] structured [PLC] time to talk; otherwise you never find anybody free.” With only one free period each day teachers have struggled to find the time to plan and grade lessons and engage in conversations with colleagues. What is more, PLC reporting requirements have, at least at the current level of discretionary time currently made available in the system, added an additional layer of data analysis, sharing and reflection which teacher participants likewise struggled to meaningfully incorporate into their practice. Reflecting on the weekly PLC meetings one veteran teacher noted,

You know, 40 minutes is very short.... When I’m here for a 7:15 meeting, it’s 40 minutes... You feel like you’re shot out of a gun for the rest of the day. I just feel rushed all day because I don’t have that five or ten-minute gap time before the students walk in the room. *I’m* walking in when they walk in.

Furthermore, teachers struggled to meet with both their vertically- and horizontally-aligned teams on a regular basis and felt as though the feedback they could provide their peers on both their own

work and the work of their students was likewise limited by time constraints. According to another teacher,

The only problem is with the time that we have in the morning it's hard to get to meet with two teams. You kind of pick one and you end up sticking with that one. [When we do discuss assessments] it's super-brief... because we don't actually have the *time* to go through each other's tests... I wish we had the time to go through each other's tests. But [a colleague will] take a good essay and give it to me and I'll take a good essay and give it to [them]. I'll skim it and we'll say, "Oh, well that's interesting," and that's about all the feedback that we get. But I wish that we had more time to do that.

Teachers regularly commented on the ways in which time constraints limited the types of data which they were able to share with their PLC groups. Although many felt they, their colleagues and their students could learn more from a more detailed analysis of student writing, due to the increased demands on their very limited time teachers often instead tended to bring quantitative statistical data which seemed easier to address given their hectic schedules. According to one veteran teacher,

Our administrators do not say that we *have* to use standardized tests or even our own multiple-choice tests or even multiple-choice tests developed by textbook publishers like McGraw Hill. They don't say that. I'm bringing that in because when I need to have something to say about what my students are learning in terms of formative and summative, it's *easier* for *me*, as an instructor, considering what else I have to do, to bring in this kind of data. [Qualitative data] is great. But you know what? It takes a longer time to put it together.

This sense that the work of professional learning is of value for both teachers and students and that the feedback it provides and the analysis and reflection it facilitates can lead to improved

practice seemed nearly universally accepted. However teachers, pressed by increased requirements and decreased time, felt it was difficult to do the work well. As another veteran teacher summarized,

See, it seems with the PLC process we've had many new things introduced. And each time something new has been introduced... It's a great... I mean they're valid, good ideas, but each time it takes away a little chunk of teacher time to work. I mean, it's all good, it's all for the benefit of the student... So there's just been little pieces of time... And so I find myself monopolized by parts... They're *related* to my job, but they take me away from some of the other things I need to do too... So it's sometimes overwhelming that way. Feeling a lot of stress.... A lot of pressures. A lot of people needing a lot.... It's all *good* but something's gotta give somewhere.

Though teachers have been provided with short weekly opportunities to meet they see a need for a more substantial reallocation of time as necessary if they are to truly and successfully become a professional learning community.

Discussion within the context of the literature. Although the professional learning community model used by Central High created structures that brought more focused feedback to participants the most current revisions seemed to have simultaneously stifled other feedback loops in the system. While both the teachers and administrators involved in the study felt that the incorporation of PLC coaches and the vertically- and horizontally-aligned teams had positively impacted the system both likewise voiced concerns about feeling more isolated and cut off from the work of others than in previous PLC iterations. As Hord and Sommers (2008) suggest, whereas schools that struggle often complain about a lack of clear communication, “well-developed communication structures support the professional learning community” (pp. 51-52). Having realized the need for more focused feedback and clearer communication Central’s PLC

system was modified to include smaller and more focused teams with PLC coaches for improved communication and oversight. At the same time, having realized the ways in which these changes have both enhanced and hampered the learning of individuals throughout the system, future planned modifications to Central's PLC model include different uses of time and teacher arrangement. Using a "both, and" approach, one which makes feedback available from both the departmental and more focused team groups, *and* considers how individuals might gain further feedback through structures which help them interact with larger parts of the system, is essential as professional learning communities evolve and work to reduce isolation. As Wheatley (2006) writes,

Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and its parts. We expand our vision to see the whole, then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments. With each iteration, we see more of the whole, and gain new understandings about individual elements. We paint a portrait of the whole, surfacing as much detail as possible. Then we inquire into a few pivotal events or decisions, and search for great detail there also. We keep dancing between the two levels, bringing the sensitivities and information gleaned from one level to help us understand the other. If we hold awareness of the whole as we study the part, and understand the part in its relationship to the whole, profound new insights become available. (p. 143)

Central High School, it seems, is involved in such a dance, determined to create structures which reduce isolation and maximize feedback.

The experiences of participants also made it clear that those structuring professional learning communities need to maximize processes which encourage individual and collective reflection so as to enhance learning throughout the organization. As Darling-Hammond (2010)

notes, America's schools are full of innovation, but there are few school systems that "proactively construct the conditions under which high-quality teaching can be widely available" (p. 162). Though Central's PLC system required the analysis of student data and teacher reflection on student work, efforts which teachers saw as valuable and which Barber and Mourshed (2007) suggest would lead to improved instruction, the learning gained from such efforts often never impacted anyone beyond the individual teacher. As Wheatley (2006) stresses, we need "less reverence for the objects we create, and... more attention to the processes we use to create them. Healthy processes create better relationships among us, more clarity about who we are, and more information about what's going on around us" (p. 155). The data and information contained in the portfolios, teacher participants suggested, had the potential to serve as both near- and long-term sources of learning and could be shared throughout the system, helping others benefit from the learning of their peers. Purposeful attention to the processes used to extend and maximize other's access to the individuals, materials and data that could enhance learning is essential if professional learning communities are to be sustained. As Harris and Lambert (2003) note, communication needs to be "open and fluid, include feedback loops and be practiced [*sic*] by everyone.... The central function of [the] system is to create and share information and to interpret and make sense of information as it is generated and shared" (p. 91). By their own admission Central High School is in only the opening stages of making data meaningful throughout the system. The suggestions offered by the administrator and teacher participants in this study seem especially relevant and should be carefully considered by others interested in creating professional learning communities of their own.

Finally, the literature makes it clear that if educators are to truly improve their practice and enhance student learning substantial time devoted to contextualized professional development activities must be provided. Although provided with 45 minutes of structured PLC time weekly,

roughly 25 hours over the duration of the school year, the teachers and administrators involved in this study felt that additional time was required if they and the system were to meaningfully enhance their own learning and the learning of all students. Whereas Yoon et al. (2007) suggest that 14 hours or less of professional development will have a negligible impact on student learning, the 25 hours of PLC professional development provided to Central's teaching staff was near the 30 to 100 hour mark at which Yoon et al. suggest substantial gains in teacher and student learning begin. With only one additional free period per day, with the newly added analysis and reflection requirements and with little time to talk to their colleagues outside of PLC structures, teacher participants struggled with managing time and all that was required of them. The administrators in the study, with numerous PLC teams to visit and reams of teacher- and team-created data to review and provide feedback on, were similarly overwhelmed. Elmore's (2004) concept of reciprocity within systems seems once more applicable to the professional learning community arrangement at Central High School and throughout the district. Though the teachers and administrators in the study seemed willing and eager to enhance their learning and improve their practice, the system has a similar responsibility to provide the resources necessary to meet the district's increased demands. Chief among these resources is time. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) stress, U.S. schools rarely create extended collaborative learning experiences for educators which "allow teachers to work together on issues of instructional planning, learn from one another..., conduct research on the outcomes of classroom practices, and collectively guide curriculum, assessment, and professional learning decisions" (p. 6). Highly-rated international education systems regularly provide 100 hours per school year for such work (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). If the teachers at Central High are to meaningfully meet with both their horizontally- and vertically-aligned teams on a regular basis, are to analyze the data most relevant to their instructional context and are to revise their practice in light of this learning and the feedback

which others provide then substantial time must be dedicated to the process. As Wheatley (2009) notes, “If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that” (p. 103).

Having used PLCs to shift their focus from covering content to ensuring that students master specific learning targets, Central’s teachers and administrators are currently engaged in creating a system which allows them to apply that same shift to their own professional learning practices. As currently envisioned the system’s methods seem to ensure that each coach and teacher team has covered the items listed on PLC checklists and collected and submitted the appropriate pieces to team binders, in effect holding them accountable for a necessary but not always meaningful content. Though checklists ensure the completion of a task they do not necessarily ensure teacher learning unless it is thoughtfully reviewed and feedback is provided to educators. However Central and the district in which it resides seem dedicated to continually improving their PLC system. Kanter (2004) suggests that the “decision to... rally rather than get discouraged, involves seeing setbacks... as an opportunity to learn and move on. [For optimists] negative events are temporary glitches... [and] setbacks are due to specific causes that can be identified and fixed” (p. 357). Successful systems, therefore, use feedback to learn to fail intelligently, realizing that mistakes are inevitable and what is more important is the ability to learn from errors and modify future efforts as a result of having worked to understand previous processes (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). As the district learns to consistently allocate substantial time for both administrators and teachers to devote to the process they will no longer simply cover PLC requirements much as they simply covered curriculum in the past. Rather, they will clarify the larger purposes of the curriculum’s scope and sequence, assess what professionals know and are able to do, and create systemic feedback loops that support each teacher in a timely fashion so as to create a school and district composed of teachers wholeheartedly engaged in improving their

practice. This, it seems is the path Central's staff and administrative leaders are walking. "That's the key," one administrator suggested. "PLC is to become *what* you do, not another *thing* you do." Central High School's administrators and the teacher participants from the English Department seem willing to become a true professional learning community in every sense of the word if only given the time.

Chapter 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Recognizing that the educational process is ultimately an interaction between a teacher and a student and realizing that the quality of instruction and individual educator effectiveness is therefore paramount to supporting student learning, educational systems throughout the world mandate professional development for their staff. Although short and infrequent district-run workshops are the most common form of professional development for U.S. educators such work is often disjointed, decontextualized and has little impact on the actual practice of the nation's teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Even when meaningful professional development is provided educators too often work in systems which isolate them from their peers, removing valuable forms of feedback which might positively impact practice. Such isolation creates educational environments and curricular programs which often lack continuity and provide students with unequal educational experiences from year to year (Senge et al., 2000). Student success, therefore, depends not only on individual teacher quality but also on the collective capacity of our educational systems. By creating structures that afford educators the opportunity to seek out, dialogue, share and actively apply professional knowledge and feedback, educational systems collectively improve (Elmore, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Recognizing the importance of such structures some schools have begun to utilize a professional learning community model, one which DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006) define as

...educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

By providing educators with substantial time to engage in work central to their unique teaching contexts PLCs support teachers as they discuss curricular aims and clarify student learning targets, create shared assessments and actively monitor individual student learning. Such situations are rich in feedback as teachers share craft knowledge, offer advice to colleagues, fill in gaps in each other's practice and learn to collectively examine and reflect upon student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Earl & LeMahieu, 1997).

Although the benefits of professional learning communities have been generally examined little is known regarding the specific types of feedback members provide, the ways in which team members reflect upon and react to such feedback and how, if at all, classroom practice is modified in light of this new information. This phenomenological study explored the formal and informal feedback loops involved both among the members of a PLC team and between the team and the administrators that oversaw them. The study focused on building descriptions of the lived experiences of participants prior to involvement in a professional learning community to understand the type of work and feedback they looked to as they strove to improve their teaching practice and how, if at all, this work, the sources or types of feedback they received, and how they modify practice currently having become members of a PLC team have changed because of this experience. In so doing the study aimed to arrive at the essence of best practice approaches to providing and receiving feedback when working with and within a PLC team. The research questions which the study addressed included:

1. How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice?

2. What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?

3. How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide?

4. How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice have changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community?

5. What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice?

To address the research questions a phenomenological study was conducted in the spring of 2012. The study utilized interviews conducted with eight high school English teachers and two building administrators as the primary form of data collection. Research participants all worked within the same building in a district using a professional learning community model as a means of professional development; though modified each year, PLC structures had been a part of the district since fall of 2009.

To assist in framing the research questions a review of the literature was conducted; this review examined five themes. These themes included: (a) the role of professional development, (b) professional learning communities, (c) examining the work of teachers and administrators through a systems lens, (d) the creation of effective feedback systems, and (e) the need to understand various forms of feedback.

In establishing the need for the study trends in professional development, both in the United States and abroad, were considered and the professional learning community model examined. The review of the literature demonstrated that educators in U.S. schools are provided with far less time for professional development than their international counterparts. What is more, when such opportunities do exist little research has sought to understand the lived

experiences of the individuals working within such systems and the specific ways in which multiple forms of feedback have led to a modification of teacher and administrator practice.

This phenomenological study examined the lives of eight teachers and two administrators and explored the role and impact of feedback in their professional lives both prior to and after the implementation of PLCs in their district. In doing so the researcher has provided a detailed description of the lives of teachers and administrator prior to the implementation of PLCs and the ways in which they gathered feedback and modified their practice, the ways in which the move to a professional learning community model and the subsequent yearly changes have impacted how they give and receive feedback, and how participants suggest feedback structures might be most effectively arranged to improve teacher learning. A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to allow the participants to speak for themselves, focusing “less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). The teaching contexts of educators throughout this nation are diverse and varied; through an extensive inclusion of the direct voices of the research participants this study seeks to validate their unique and informative experiences. This phenomenological study acknowledges as unique each educator and educational setting and does not presume that the setting or participants described herein are representative of a universal teaching experience. Instead, the study provides thorough and descriptive contextualized details so that others, in similar situations, might consider the ways in which professional learning community arrangements have impacted or might impact the feedback they receive in their own teaching or administrative contexts, thus creating systems which maximize the power of individual and collective teacher learning.

Summary of Results

Although it quickly became apparent that participant's responses spanned multiple research questions and a thematic arrangement would thus better suit any discussion of the study's findings, some readers may find benefit from a more direct connection of the developed research themes to the research questions. Though readers are encouraged to explore the thematic sections for a more complete picture, this section serves as both a summary of the research findings and offers a brief discussion tying the research questions to the thematic descriptions explored in Chapter 4 of this document.

Research question #1: How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice? Participants' responses described any number of impacts that feedback available in the PLC had on their practice; responses most closely aligned with themes #1 (trust), #2 (reduced isolation, collaboration, increased feedback and desire for feedback) and #3 (a shift from coverage to student learning supported by meaningful data). Teacher participants clearly felt that, as members of a professional learning community, they were provided with regular opportunities to dialogue over practice. Such opportunities allowed them to seek out and provide feedback as well as expose weaknesses in their practice; this was only possible because teachers could trust that their colleagues would support them and assist them in overcoming obstacles.

As PLC structures and regular discussions brought veteran and early-career teachers together trust was built and educators felt more comfortable modifying their practice. Participants attributed their willingness to offer specific feedback when they might otherwise have listened quietly as well as the increased removal, insertion or modification of content to the feedback of their peers. Teachers noted that their PLC peers and the administration supported changes to curriculum and instruction when such modifications responded to students' learning needs.

Administrators likewise noted how the trust necessary to first establish PLCs and the subsequent informal conversations they had had with teachers helped them provide feedback and give educators permission to modify instruction so as to most effectively impact student learning. The trusting environment, therefore, helped participants feel more connected to the collective work of their PLC team, increased their willingness to collaborate with others and encouraged them to seek out additional feedback from other parts of the system.

The feedback which participants received and the ways in which professional learning communities encouraged them to interact with group members resulted in a large shift which changed the focus of their instruction from covering material to ensuring that students had truly learned essential concepts. What is more, feedback and reporting structures necessitated that these determinations be based on concrete data. This led teacher participants to create shared formative and summative assessments, more closely analyze individual student learning and modify grading practices. It also led administrators to work toward using structures such as the Core Resource Center, PLC coaches and binders containing teachers' quarterly analyses and reflections as data points to ensure true learning was occurring. The feedback supported by professional learning community structures, therefore, led the participants in the study to modify their practice in numerous and significant ways.

Research question #2: What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?

Participants described both the roles of feedback and the ways in which they accessed and utilized feedback prior to their involvement in professional learning communities very differently than they did their current circumstances; theme #2 (reduced isolation, collaboration, increased feedback and desire for feedback) best illustrates the role of feedback in participant's lives prior

to PLCs. Participants almost universally described lives of curricular isolation prior to the implementation of professional learning communities, entering situations in which they were, with the exception of curriculum guides, almost solely responsible for the content and assessments within a course. Though feeling welcomed by their peers, frequent dialogues centered on practice were not a part of their regular professional experience; systemic feedback loops were nonexistent.

When participants did receive feedback it was because they had sought out the advice of veteran teachers or those who had taught similar coursework. In these instances teachers usually described receiving materials from their colleagues, assignment handouts which the participants included in their practice; they sometimes sought opportunities to discuss instruction based off of these materials and how practice might be modified. Veteran teachers, as members of a once-larger department in which multiple teachers shared an office, sometimes described asking officemates who may have overheard instruction for advice or offering suggestions themselves in such situations. Beyond these circumstances in which educators sought out the advice of others, however, responses demonstrate that outside feedback played only a small role in helping them improve their practice prior to their involvement in professional learning communities. Instead, teachers created materials in isolation, spending long hours designing projects and assessments which assessed learning targets they had individually selected.

Research questions #3 & #4: How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide? & How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice has changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community? Centered on the general experiences of each participant as a member of a professional learning community, responses which assist in

understanding research questions #3 and #4 can be found embedded in each theme. Participants stressed the ways in which professional learning communities within the department under study, between the smaller vertically- and horizontally-aligned teams and between teachers and administrators had worked to create a trusting environment. Establishing trust opened doors to new conversations which brought new forms of feedback into the system, feedback which helped participants focus more intently on student learning and use data to support their analysis and better meet students' needs. Involvement in a PLC brought about multiple changes in the lives of educators, making the selection of learning targets and the creation and analysis of formative and summative assessments the work of teacher teams, not isolated instructors, increasing their regular access to the thoughts and reactions of colleagues, and increasing their desire to have access to additional feedback which might help them improve their practice.

Though recognizing that the feedback provided in the PLC system and the mandated analysis and reflection structures provided them with additional feedback on their practice, teacher participants recognized that varied sources of data were more or less relevant to their teaching contexts. Involvement in a professional learning community and interactions with peers assisted them in determining which forms of feedback best helped illuminate their current context and the learning of their students. Administrators repeatedly stressed the importance of using multiple forms of data, both the formative and summative assessments created by teacher teams as well as other external assessments, as measures of student learning. Furthermore, though they acknowledged the need for transparency and accountability in the system and realized the ways in which reporting on their PLC work provided the opportunity to receive additional feedback from the administration teachers were frustrated that more feedback was not forthcoming.

Participants clearly sought instructionally sensitive feedback mechanisms that could help them modify their practice quickly so as to most effectively impact student learning. Teachers

stressed that changes to PLC structures and arrangements, particularly the move to horizontally- and vertically-aligned teacher teams in the 2011-2012 school year and oversight by PLC coaches, had served to sharpen the feedback they received. Conversely, the move to smaller teams also created small pockets of isolated teacher teams, thus removing feedback from the system.

Teachers continually reflected on a number of key issues. Among the most important were: (a) questions as to how the system might be adapted so that they could receive feedback from those closest to their teaching situation but also stay connected to the whole department, (b) how reporting mechanisms including the use of binders could be used to provide feedback first to the department and then to larger school and administrative groups, and (c) how access to information created by other teacher groups and parts of the PLC system could be more readily accessible and serve as a further avenue through which feedback could pass. In a similar manner administrators sought ways to increase interactions with individual educators, teacher teams and PLC coaches as a means of both receiving feedback themselves and increasing opportunities to guide the work of teachers. Maximizing access to information which could support teacher learning and improve educational outcomes seemed their chief concern.

Finally, all involved stressed that it was difficult to make the best use of the feedback available in the system given the current time limitations. Although pleased with the collaborative atmosphere and the district's willing to provided them with time each week to engage in PLC activities, administrators and teachers alike recognized that making the most of the feedback already present in the system would only truly be possible when additional time was dedicated to the process.

Research Question #5: What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice? Although all themes are thoroughly populated

with the suggested best practices of giving and receiving feedback, those themes most relevant to the research question include #2, #3 and #5 which focus on collaboration and feedback, an improved focus on student learning and the consideration of systemic structures. Teachers consistently mentioned the importance of having access to their peers, especially those who taught similar or related classes, as one of the most valuable sources of feedback available to them in PLCs. Their experiences and comments demonstrated the importance of engaging in a regular dialogue which centers on a shared content, the ways in which varied students react to the same or similar lessons, which learning targets individual students or groups of students have mastered and why, and how various assessments and approaches to scoring shared assessments help inform teacher practice. Teachers indicated that particular forms of feedback were especially valuable. The most useful forms included: (a) conversations which centered on the specific instructional materials used in a course, such as shared readings, rubrics and assessments; (b) thorough descriptions of teaching activity such as when colleagues described the ways in which they helped a struggling student understand a particular concept or approach learning a certain skill; and (c) conversations regarding the teacher's shared knowledge of a particular student and how to best address the individual student's learning needs. Although difficult within the time constraints of regular PLC meetings and with the implemented reporting requirements, teachers indicated that opportunities to discuss the scoring of assessments and examine the responses of students in other classes were similarly valuable.

Administrators, especially in light of the large amounts of data and reports being created by each teacher and PLC team throughout the building, noted the helpfulness of having information collected in a single location. Both administrator participants indicated that they would prefer such information was stored and disseminated electronically instead of in its current hard-copy form. Although finding the reporting useful, however, both administrators also stressed

the importance of being able to engage in small group and one-on-one conversations with PLC coaches and individual educators; engaging in an interactive dialogue assisted them in more proactively addressing teacher's needs and clarifying expectations, a feedback loop which they saw as immediate and highly valuable.

Including more responsive, data-driven and instructionally sensitive forms of feedback were also highly prized by all of the study's participants. Teachers seemed especially frustrated by feedback which did not meet their immediate needs, seemed disconnected from their teaching context or the lives of their students, was mandated but received little attention, seemed too late in coming to help educators meaningfully modify instruction or which remained in the hands of a few instead of being shared to enhance the collective learning of the group. Practices which make feedback a regular part of educator's experiences, are open and easily accessible throughout the system, and are supportive of teachers unique instructional contexts and a source of information which can be applied almost immediately to enhance teacher practice and student learning represent the best practices of giving and receiving feedback within a professional learning community.

Recommendations, Suggestions and Considerations

The purpose of this study has been one of description, meant to bring to life the experiences of individual teachers and administrators as they reflect upon the ways in which the implementation of a professional learning community model has impacted both the types of feedback they receive and the implications of that feedback for their professional practice. The researcher does not assume that any two teaching contexts are identical and therefore the conclusions reached in this study should not be used in a prescriptive manner. Instead the findings should be used by other educators to reflect upon their own individual and systemic circumstances and, when transferrable, considered to establish purposeful and meaningful

feedback loops within their organization. In so doing the results may be used to help address aspects of teacher work and systems planning which are far too frequently overlooked, improving the quality of feedback from the onset and creating more meaningful and instructionally sensitive feedback systems. It is with this in mind that the researcher makes the following recommendations.

Implications to consider: Teachers. For those teacher participants in the study involvement in a professional learning community seemed to foster trust in others, improve collaboration, change interactions from a sharing of materials to a true dialogue over practice and shift the focus and energies in their work from simply covering materials to instead following instruction with a closer analysis and reflection upon data to ensure that students were learning the concepts being taught. What is more, teachers, although struggling with the time necessary to complete such work, seemed to value the increased feedback which professional learning communities regularly brought to them, understood the potential benefits of regular and shared reflection on practice and actually seemed to want additional feedback, both from their teaching colleagues and the administration, assuming that it was timely, instructionally sensitive and directly related to their practice. Systems utilizing a professional learning community structure hold these potential benefits for teachers, however systems which support such work cannot exist without a trusting environment, should not be built without teacher input and do not exist in a systemic vacuum. Teachers need to be proactive members of their school communities and systems. They must demand collaborative professional development focused on clarifying learning targets, creating and scoring shared assessments and engaging in regular dialogues centered on practice. Furthermore they must both be willing to hold themselves and their peers accountable for demonstrating improved student learning while simultaneously demanding that the reporting and feedback mechanisms utilized by their school system accurately reflect the

instruction in their classroom, utilizing data that is relevant to their teaching context, and provide regular, constructive and timely feedback from all corners of the system. Teachers must insist that systemic feedback structures actually support their efforts to improve student learning; where they do not teachers must be assertive, calling for modifications to systemic structures so as to improve the feedback loops which help them maximize the learning of their students as well as their own professional learning and the collective capacity of the entire system. As Elmore (2004) suggests, teachers must be involved in systems which improve the quality of instruction throughout the system. Improving teacher and student learning is “more a function of *learning to do the right things* in the setting where you work than it is of what you know when you start to do the work” (Elmore, 2004, p. 73; emphasis in original). Teachers must be forceful advocates for systems that are true learning communities.

Finally, to truly realize such systems and improve the quality and value of feedback in their professional lives teachers must be strong advocates for the time necessary to successfully complete such work. As the experiences of the teacher participants suggest, simply mandating data analysis and reflection does not make it meaningful or informative. Teachers must be aware of the ways in which other educational systems, both abroad and in the United States, are revising the concept of meaningful and contextualized professional development and demand that their systems likewise reconsider professional development in light of the research. As Darling-Hammond (2010) notes, in the highly-rated Finnish educational system,

...as is true in many European and Asian nations, nearly *half* of teacher’s school time is used to hone practice through school-based curriculum work, collective planning, and cooperation with parents, which allows schools and families to work more closely together on behalf of students (p. 172; emphasis added).

Whereas teachers in such systems are provided with 15-20 hours each week for such work (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) only 20 percent of the average U.S. teacher's time is used in this way (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Educators must be stronger advocates for such time, must insist that it be directly related to their teaching context and the learning of their students and hold themselves and their peers accountable for results. As Fullan (2010a) suggests, giving educators to time to build their collective capacity

...generates commitment. Moral purpose, when it stares you in the face through... your peers working together to make lives and society better, is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible. The collective motivational well seems bottomless. The speed of effective change increases exponentially. Collective capacity, quite simply, gets more and deeper things done in shorter periods of time. (p.72)

The educators involved in this study understood the value of the work being done and recognized that additional time dedicated to the process was necessary if teacher learning was to be meaningfully infused into the system's structures. Educators involved in professional learning communities need to strongly advocate for substantial time dedicated to professional development, using their awareness of the larger educational research base to justify such claims.

Implications to consider: Building administrators and district policy makers. In addition to considering those suggestions already provided to the teachers whom they oversee, building administrators and district policy makers need to pay special attention to creating the conditions and processes which maximize instructionally-sensitive feedback throughout the system. Beyond doing all that they can to dedicate the substantial and frequent amount of time necessary for educators to engage in professional learning communities, administrators and policy makers, in their role as evaluators, have the added responsibility of ensuring that educators are held accountable for improving student learning and yet that such efforts take place within a

trusting context. As transparency increases in professional learning communities administrators must create trusting environments in which educators feel safe in exposing weaknesses in their practice; teachers must be able to expect that they will be supported with access to resources and individuals who can assist them in improving their performance. In short, administrators and policy makers must hold firmly to the concept of reciprocity (Elmore, 2004), dedicating time and resources proportionately as their expectations for teachers increase. Teacher participants in the study seemed to trust their colleagues enough to share their practice, acknowledge weakness and draw on the strengths of their colleagues, knowing they were collectively dedicated to improving student learning. If education systems are to improve it is critical that teachers feel confident in placing this same trust in their administrators. The study participants, for example, expressed a willingness to analyze student work and reflect upon data; they simultaneously noted that if the administration expected them to analyze data in increasingly sophisticated ways substantial training would be needed. Having established an environment in which it was safe to make such admissions, encouraged by PLC coaches and administrators to indicate areas of need, and having been made aware of such needs because of established feedback loops the administration at Central High was engaged in how to meet this professional development need in the following school year. As PLCs are established systems administrators and policy makers likewise need to create trusting environments and feedback loops which encourage teachers to indicate areas in which support is needed and reciprocate by providing the necessary resources. Such arrangements enhance the collective capacity of the system.

Furthermore, as administrators and policy makers introduce professional learning communities they are encouraged, instead of restricting access to feedback and data and making it the realm of a limited few, to remake systems in ways which redistribute power and allow instructionally sensitive information to flow freely throughout the organization. Being required by

Central's PLC structures to analyze student data and report their findings, and fully aware that teachers throughout not only their department and building but also throughout their district were engaged in the same tasks, the teacher participants involved in the study recognized that a large source of data existed which could potentially impact their practice. At the same time administrators in the study acknowledged their present inability, even with the implementation of PLC coaches, to adequately review the detailed work of so many educators in their building. In essence, by restricting access to the teacher-created data and requiring that it funnel only to the administrators through a traditional and hierarchical approach, the ability to provide feedback had been bottlenecked and slowed, additional and valuable voices had been excluded from potential extended conversations of practice, and thus valuable sources of information which could help educators connect with and learn from the work of their colleagues had been removed from the system. Educators, for their part, recognized how such structures were antithetical to the stated goals of professional learning communities. Administrators, overwhelmed with the quantity of data to manage, were likewise often frustrated.

As policy makers and administrators work to build true professional learning communities, therefore, significant consideration should be given to the roles that power and feedback play and how traditional hierarchical systems which distribute power and decision-making in the hands of a few may, in fact, frustrate educators, hinder individual and organizational learning and limit the rate at which the collective capacity of the learning community can be built. Though not advocating an abdication of their responsibilities as leaders in their education systems, it is recommended that those charged with making policy and overseeing the work of teachers distribute power, leadership and decision-making responsibilities. Such a transition helps move the work of system leaders "from enforcing procedures to building capacity [and] from managing compliance to managing improvement" (Darling-Hammond, 2010,

p. 270). Through such an approach isolation is further reduced and teachers are empowered to act in ways which best support their own learning and the learning of their students.

Such systems can only be realized when clear feedback loops exist within educational settings, channels which facilitate communication between teachers, colleagues, the administration and district policy makers. The participants in this study, both administrators and teachers, expressed a desire to have larger and larger input, to connect with others throughout the system, to share what they had learned about their instructional practice and the inner workings of their evolving professional learning community model. Learning from the limitations of traditional hierarchical communication arrangements, policymakers should embrace a systems view of education, establishing feedback loops which encourage interaction between all parts of the organization. Their role should be one of fostering “new relationships [that] connect more and more of the system... [so that] as information circulates freely it creates new business and propels people into new relationships” that further learning (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, *The Dynamics of Self-Organization* section, para. 1). Systems which integrate professional learning communities but ignore the importance of such communication channels or allow them to form haphazardly unnecessarily frustrate employees and limit the collective learning of the organization. As Hord and Sommers (2008) note, too often research on professional learning communities ignores the role that feedback plays in such systems; it appears that administrators and policymakers, in addition to academic researchers, who refuse to train their attention on the importance of systemic feedback mechanisms do so at their own peril.

Implications to consider: Researchers. Although discussions of professional learning communities are becoming commonplace in the literature, DuFour et al. (2008) argue that “the term is now used so ubiquitously to describe any loose grouping of educators that it is in danger

of losing all meaning” (p. 14). The definition used by DuFour, DuFour, Eakers and Many (2006) qualifies professional learning communities as

...educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

Although the participants involved in this study were members of a PLC community which adheres to this definition, future research must work to clarify distinctions between simple groups of educators and systems dedicated to a true professional learning community model. Little academic research, especially that which is descriptive in nature, explores the workings of such groups, and that which does almost universally ignores the role which feedback plays in the system and how it enhances or detracts from teacher learning. Although this study serves as one example of the ways in which feedback impacts the lives of teachers and administrators within a true professional learning community more such studies are needed.

Future researchers may find it useful to conduct a larger-scale inquiry into the role and implications of feedback within professional learning communities. Although the research discussed here-in followed one teacher group the experiences within other departments and other teacher teams are likewise important and would create a more complete image of the role of feedback in a PLC system. Examining feedback within a mixed group of educators (e.g. a team composed of physical education, art, music and world languages teachers) and the ways in which such a diverse group of educators addresses issues of student learning may be particularly enlightening. Future researchers may also find it useful to analyze additional sources of data. Within the context of this study potential data points to examine or create might include: (a)

artifacts such as the quarterly data analysis and reflections which teachers prepared as well as the feedback which administrators provide; (b) observations of PLC teacher team meetings, the monthly meetings between PLC coaches and the curriculum coordinators, and administrative meetings; and (c) new data arrived at by asking educators to record the type of feedback which they give and receive and how they respond and modify practice in such situations. This additional data would bring further detail to the lives of participants and more intricately examine the role that feedback plays in their lives as participants in a professional learning community. Finally a longitudinal study of teachers working within a PLC context would assist others in understanding the ways in which professional learning communities continue to evolve and adapt. Key understandings regarding how the ways in which feedback is given and received change over time in a PLC, how systemic structures are modified and how they inhibit, have a negligible effect or promote teacher learning over time, and the long-term impact of such feedback on teacher and student learning might all be uncovered through longitudinal study.

Final Thoughts

Freire, writing in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, suggested that issues of power, control and isolation oppress the human spirit and stifle what individuals are capable of; the same is true in our nation's schools. Freire wrote,

Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know. (2009; p. 90)

Professional learning communities seek to create such environments, to nurture trust and humility, to work openly and collaboratively to name what is essential in their professional world and to the learning lives of their students, to acknowledge that everyone, if only given the opportunity, has experiences and wisdom to share which can improve the collective whole. True professional learning communities build environments which maximize sources of potential feedback, generating systems in which “information [is transformed] from being the *currency of exchange*... to being the *medium* of [the] organization [and something educators] can’t live without.... It has to be everywhere in the organization to sustain [it]” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, Information section, para. 3; emphasis in original). Though seemingly commonsensical many schools in the United States struggle to implement these lessons, inexplicably adhering to workplaces which reinforce isolation and neglect substantial and meaningful professional development. This study, though simple in its nature and limited in its scope, begins to shed a light on what feedback looks like and how the lives of educators begin to change when exposed to a professional learning community model. It is clear that *learning* must be moved to the forefront in all parts of our educational systems. Covering material in a class is no longer adequate; we must ensure that students have truly learned the content. Checking off an item or completing a prerequisite number of hours in a district workshop must no longer masquerade as successful professional development; teachers must engage and be engaged in activities which foster continual, job-embedded and contextualized learning. As Dalton McGuinty, the premier of Ontario puts it, “You can have world-class standards, rigorous testing and brilliant data management so we know precisely how each student is faring – but you still have to improve your teaching. (p. 6)” (as cited in Fullan, 2010a, p. 65). True professional learning communities can help us do just that.

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Appendix A

Invitation E-mail - Administrators

March 31, 2012

[Dear Administrators]

Let me begin by introducing myself. I'm David Roloff, an Instructor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. At UWSP I primarily teach Methods of Composition for future high school English teachers ([multiple employees of the district] are all former students) as well as Methods of Teaching Reading and Composition for English minors. Prior to returning to UWSP (my alma mater) I taught high school English for nine years in Two Rivers, WI. At present, in addition to teaching fulltime at UWSP I am also a fulltime doctoral student in the University of Minnesota – Duluth's Ed.D program; it's in this last capacity that I'm writing today.

Having successfully completed two years of coursework and having recently passed my preliminary written exam, I'm at the point in my doctoral work where I can fully begin to focus on the aspects of education which I find most interesting; in my case that is adding to the research on professional learning communities, the ways in which these structures work and the potential they have for transforming the educational landscape. Most specifically, I'm interested in both the formal and informal feedback loops present in such systems which teachers identify as having the greatest impact on their own learning and the specific types of feedback they suggest result in the greatest actual changes to their classroom practice. My conversations with researchers including Michael Fullan have helped to reinforce the fact that a "finer grained" understanding of the role of feedback in successful PLCs is essential to advancing our understanding of the concept and bringing it to scale; from what I've heard the work you're undertaking [in your high school] could serve as a powerful example of such practices. Although I have specific research interests I would, of course, want to ensure that the teachers involved, [the high school] and the district ultimately find the study of value and therefore remain understandably flexible, believing that we can, in consultation, arrive at a research project that is meaningful for all involved.

My hope is to be able to observe the work of a team in a professional learning community (one true to and meeting the definition developed by Rick DuFour) and examine the role of feedback through the eyes of the teachers themselves. I've taken the time to have a few informal conversations with [former students who are now employees of the district and their descriptions] of the work underway at the high school and middle school levels seems to overlap nicely with my areas of interest. Ultimately I would be interested in observing the work of the English Department. I'm hoping that both the administration and the members of the [high school] English Department might be willing to work with me and allow me to sit in on group meetings, conduct informal interviews, etc.

I'm presently in the early stages of writing the openings to my dissertation, steps that need to be completed prior to conducting any research. I'm hoping to be at the stage where I could actually start collecting data in late spring of 2012; there would therefore be plenty of time for us to discuss options, approaches, ways to ensure that the data would be useful to all involved, etc. Seeing as I'm in these early stages, however, I need to "secure" a research site so that I can develop my plan further; I therefore thought I'd write to those closest to this potential process, the building administrators who oversee the faculty members I'm hoping to engage, before I made a more formal request through established district protocols.

Attached you will find an abstract/proposal of the research I'd like to conduct this spring. As you'll see I think the information gathered would be extremely useful to both [the high school] and the district and would offer valuable insights into an area of the PLC process which has not been addressed in the research literature even as the PLC model has begun to become more and more popular nationwide.

I appreciate very much your taking the time to consider this request. I look forward to hearing your initial thoughts and the conversations and collaboration that lie ahead.

Best,
David

Appendix B

Research Proposal - Administrators

David J. Roloff
Research Proposal
[Central High School/School District]

This abstract is presented as a work in progress; the study as currently proposed, therefore, is flexible and can be modified after further consultation and collaboration with the district.

This study seeks to build a description of the best practices of giving and receiving feedback within a professional learning community. It seeks to examine the feedback structures, both formal and informal, at work within the English PLC group at [Central High School]. The intent is to detail how participants have experienced the phenomenon of giving and receiving feedback in their professional learning community team prior to and as members of a professional learning community and the ways in which they indicate such feedback leads to a modification of practice. In the final analysis the research seeks to arrive at and describe the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback within a PLC community.

In conducting this research the study would require one to two extended interviews with members of the English Department who have informally given consent and have expressed a willingness to participate in such work. Similar interviews would be conducted with both of the high school principals. These interviews would be conducted in spring 2012. Teacher participants would also take part in a single focus group interview. To further supplement and build a description of the feedback processes in use within the [school district] other artifacts might also be requested. Some artifacts which are already largely publically available including documents which elaborate on the history and purposes of PLCs within the district and formalized policies and processes currently in place would be examined.

The proposed project aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators working in a professional learning community describe the impact of feedback on their professional lives and practice?
2. What feedback and information do teachers and administrators describe as having influenced and led to the improvement of their practice prior to becoming a member of the professional learning community under study?
3. How do educators and administrators describe their lived experience of giving, receiving and acting upon the feedback which their colleagues in the PLC provide?
4. How, if at all, would educators and administrators describe the ways in which their thinking and practice have changed as a result of giving and receiving feedback as a member in a professional learning community?
5. What would teachers and administrators in a PLC identify in their experience as having been the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback which most positively impacted their practice?

The best practices uncovered through this study hold potential benefits for other professional learning community groups, both within [your school district] and throughout the nation. Such a study would benefit the district in that it would build descriptions of the ways in which educators

working within the district are experiencing the PLC model as currently implemented. Furthermore it would help ascertain how the system might be modified to maximize the use of best practices within PLC teams and between PLC groups and the administration throughout the district. Such information is currently missing from the research on PLCs and would add to our understanding of how such processes can be maximized by systems and within schools and groups to effectively and positively impact educator practice.

This study will not impact the scope and sequence of curriculum or take teachers away from instructional time. It does not involve work with students. Those individuals taking part in the research will remain anonymous and will have full access to the findings prior to publication to ensure their accuracy. All participants will be briefed on the purpose of the research prior to commencing this work; their signed consent will be obtained and participants would be able to remove themselves from the research project at any time should they so choose.

Appendix C

Invitation Letter – Teachers



University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

College of Letters & Science
Department of English

Stevens Point WI 54481-3897
715-346-4757/4758; Fax 715-346-4215

David J. Roloff
Instructor of English
University of Wisconsin Stevens Point
Collins Classroom Center 222
(715) 346-4341

April 30, 2012

Dear Members of the High School English Department:

Let me begin by first introducing myself. I am David Roloff, an Instructor of English at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point and also a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota – Duluth’s Department of Education. I’m writing today in the hopes of arranging a meeting with the members of the English Department so as to explain the research I’d like to conduct as a part of my EdD program; I’m hoping you’re willing to hear my proposal and to potentially work with me as participants in this research for my dissertation.

For a long time, since my own days as a high school English teacher, I’ve been interested in the ways in which individual teachers leave the isolation of their classroom and work collaboratively with their colleagues and focus their work on improved student results, exactly the type of work it seems is taking place within your professional learning community. Specifically, I’m interested in how educators describe the ways in which they sought to improve their practice prior to the professional learning community model, what their experiences within the model have been like (the types of things they discuss, how they provide feedback to others, how this feedback is received), and how, if at all, educators modify their classroom practice in light of these conversations. In addition to understanding these dynamics within the PLC group I am likewise interested in how this group work and learning is shared with administrators and the ways in which this feedback leads to further modification on the part of the professional learning community teams and the administrators that oversee them. Little is presently known about this aspect of the PLC model and I’m hoping you’ll be willing to discuss your experiences with me so that together we can help other educators and systems using the professional learning community model better understand their work and how to use the “best practices” of giving and receiving feedback within a PLC.

I had the opportunity to communicate [with both building administrators] and they’ve both invited me to speak with you tomorrow morning during your PLC meeting. I wanted to ensure that my visit doesn’t infringe upon your essential work and don’t want to unnecessarily interrupt your plan for the day; at the same time I appreciate this opportunity to immediately begin our potential work together. I appreciate your time and will therefore keep my introduction brief, taking up no more than 15-20 minutes of your time. I’m planning to quickly discuss my research interests and the specifics of my proposal a bit more completely, dialogue about the ways in which I’m hoping we might work together, answer any questions you might have and then, if individuals interested, how you might officially become a participant in this study of the role that various feedback plays in your professional learning community. I’ve attached a general overview as well as the consent form for your review so that, if you so wish, you may review and come with questions; in doing so I’m simply trying to be respectful and to intrude as little as is possible on your time together.

Thank you for welcoming me to your meeting and for taking the time to consider becoming participants in this important research; I’m certain educators and researchers around the nation will be fascinated to learn from your experiences. I’m look forward to meeting you in person and talking with you more tomorrow morning.

Best,

David J. Roloff

University of Minnesota IRB Approval # 1204E13162

Appendix D
Administrator Interview Guide

Administrator Interview Guide
(Principal and Vice Principal)

Opening Script:

I would like to first thank you for taking the time to participate in today's interview. Your time and your open and honest viewpoints are appreciated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model and to build descriptions of the experiences of teachers and administrators working within such a model. Specifically this portion of the research is interested in understanding how and based on what feedback administrators tried to improve their practice and their various roles in relation to the teachers they oversee prior to the implementation of the PLC model. Furthermore, it seeks to describe how the administrator has given, received and potentially modified their practice based on feedback, both formal and informal, made available to them by current PLC structures and by the educators whom they oversee.

The following guiding questions will be used to provide some structure to the interview and ensure that similar participants are asked questions relevant to the research. You are asked, however, to see the discussion as a conversation, not as an interview in which we must adhere to strict guidelines. Please provide open and honest responses to the questions in relation to your experiences prior to and during your PLC experience regardless of whether or not you may view them as positive or negative. You are encouraged to share any events or experiences which you see as relevant to helping others understand what it has been like for you to work within the PLC model and to give, receive and/or implement feedback during this experience.

Finally, you are reminded that your responses will be kept confidential. The writing which results from this research will identify the school district, high school and individual teachers anonymously (Teacher/Administrator A, B, C, etc.). This same anonymous identification method will be applied to all of the data collected and kept in confidence between the researcher and each individual participant. You are reminded that you'll be asked to review any writing related to your statements prior to publication; this is to ensure that the descriptions created correctly relate both your experiences and intents.

Guiding Questions:

- Could you explain a little bit of your personal history in the district?
- How, prior to the implementation of the PLC, did you work to improve your practice as an administrator?
 - What sorts of interactions did you have with staff?
 - What sorts of sources of feedback did you utilize or receive? How did you act upon this information?
 - How did this work improve your practice as an administrator?
- Would you explain the background behind how the school/district came to implement the current PLC model or how you first came to experience it?
 - What were your initial thoughts or reactions in hearing about this model? How would you describe your early experiences with it?

- If asked at the onset of implementation, what would you have said were the strongest aspects of the PLC model? The drawbacks?
 - What would you say your role was in those early days?
 - How, if at all, has it evolved?
 - Having now worked in the PLC model for ___ years, what would you describe is the strongest features of a PLC? Drawbacks?
- What sorts of work has/is the English PLC done/doing this year? How do you know?
 - Could you tell me a little bit more about the ways in which you receive feedback from the teacher group? What sorts of feedback mechanisms (formal and informal) are used in the current model? How, if relevant, does that information come to you as the administrator?
 - How, if relevant, is that information stored and/or disseminated to other PLC teams or to larger district structures? That is to say, how is feedback used in the larger system?
 - How, if at all, does the feedback mechanisms you've described lead to a modification of your practice as an administrator?
- In what ways, if any has your practice changed because of the implementation of the PLC model?
 - How/Has the type of feedback that you receive from teachers or the type of feedback you provide them with changed from pre to working within a PLC model?
 - Which (the prior method or the PLC model) would you say has led to a greater positive change in your practice? In the practice of the educators which you oversee? Please explain.
- What makes for an effective feedback system between a PLC team and the administration?
- Based on your experience, what areas of the current PLC or the PLC model might you focus on to improve the collection and utilization of feedback so as to positively impact the practice of other administrators or teachers?
- Is there anything else that you'd like me to know related to PLCs or feedback that you haven't been asked about?

Appendix E
Teacher Interview Guide

Teacher Interview Guide

Opening Script:

I would like to first thank you for taking them time to participate in today's interview. Your time and your open and honest viewpoints are appreciated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model and to build descriptions of the experiences of teachers and administrators working within such a model. Specifically this portion of the research is interested in understanding how and based on what feedback teachers worked to improve their practice and how they worked with administrators prior to the implementation of the PLC model. Furthermore, it seeks to describe how the teachers have given, received and potentially modified their practice based on feedback, both formal (required/policy) and informal (voluntary/casual), made available to them by current PLC structures and by the educators and administrators with whom they work.

The following guiding questions will be used to provide some structure to the interview and ensure that all like participants are asked questions relevant to the research. You are asked, however, to see the discussion as a conversation, not as an interview in which we must adhere to strict guidelines. Please provide open and honest responses to the questions in relation to your experiences prior to and during your PLC experience regardless of whether or not you may view them as positive or negative. You are encouraged to share any events or experiences which you see as relevant to helping others understand what it has been like for you to work within the PLC model and to give, receive and/or implement feedback during this experience.

Finally, you are reminded that your responses will be kept confidential. The writing which results from this research will identify the school district, high school and individual teachers anonymously (Teacher/Administrator A, B, C, etc.). This same anonymous identification method will be applied to all of the data collected and kept in confidence between the researcher and each individual participant. You are reminded that you'll be asked to review any writing related to your statements prior to publication; this is to ensure that the descriptions created correctly relate both your experiences and intents.

Guiding Questions:

- Could you tell me a little bit about your educational practice prior to working with the current PLC model?
 - How long have you been teaching? Worked in the district?
 - What teaching preparation/experiences had you had?
 - What were your first experiences like in this school/district?
 - How, prior to the implementation of the PLC model, did you work to improve your teaching practice?
 - Where/How did you receive feedback on the quality of your instruction?
 - What sources of feedback or data, if any, did you rely on to understand the quality of your teaching?
 - How did you use this information to modify your teaching practice?

- Would you explain the background behind how the school/district came to implement the current PLC model or how you first came to experience it?
 - What were your initial thoughts or reactions in hearing about this model? How would you describe your early experiences with it?
 - If asked early on in your experiences with the model what would you have said were the strongest aspects of using the PLC model? The drawbacks?
 - What sorts of activities did you engage in, either alone or collaboratively, in those early days?
 - How, if at all, has it evolved?
 - Having now worked in the PLC model for ___ years, what would you describe is the strongest features of a PLC? Drawbacks?
- How, if at all, would you say the PLC structure has changed the way in which feedback is brought to you from your colleagues and/or the administrators?
 - How/Did this change pre- and post-PLC?
 - Do/How have any potential changes in feedback delivery/the system lead to a modification of your teaching practice? Could you provide a specific example?
- What sorts of work has/is the English PLC done/doing this year? Could you describe an instance or two of a PLC meeting/meetings?
 - How would you describe some of feedback that you gave to others?
 - How would you say this feedback was received? Explain.
 - How would you describe some of the feedback others gave to you?
 - Could you describe an instance where you've had your ideas, lesson planning or contributions challenged? Reinforced?
 - How did you react under these circumstances?
 - How, if relevant, would you say you modified instruction/your practice was modified because of the feedback of your peers?
- What other sorts of informal feedback, if any, do you receive from others outside of the arranged PLC meeting times? How useful/how much of an impact would you say this informal feedback has on your practice?
- How would you describe the role that the building administrators play in the PLC model as currently implemented?
 - What type of feedback, if relevant, have you received?
 - How would you describe the impact that this feedback has had on the work of the PLC?
 - On your classroom practice?
 - How, if at all, do you report the learning of the PLC to the administration and/or district?
- In what ways, if any has your practice changed because of the implementation of the PLC model?
 - How/Has the type of feedback that you receive from teachers or the type of feedback you provide them with changed from pre to working within a PLC model?
 - Which (the prior method or the PLC model) would you say has led to a greater positive change in your practice? In the practice of the educator or administrators you work with? Please explain.

- What would you say has been the most influential bit of feedback you've received this year be it from a colleague or administrator? How, if at all, has it impacted your instructional practice?
- Is there anything else that you'd like me to know related to PLCs or feedback that you haven't been asked about?

Appendix F
Teacher Focus Group Guide

Teacher Focus Group Guide

Opening Script:

I would like to first thank you for taking them time to participate in today's interview. Your time and your open and honest viewpoints are appreciated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model and to build descriptions of the experiences of teachers and administrators working within such a model. Specifically this portion of the research seeks to use group processes to help build an understanding of how and based on what feedback teachers worked to improve their practice and how they worked with administrators prior to the implementation of the PLC model. Furthermore, it seeks to describe how the teachers have given, received and potentially modified their practice based on feedback, both formal (required/policy) and informal (voluntary/casual), made available to them by current PLC structures and by the educators and administrators with whom they work.

The following guiding questions will be used to provide some structure to the focus group, to build upon themes which arose in the individual interviews, and to ensure that all participants are asked questions relevant to the research. You are asked, however, to see the discussion as a casual conversation, one in which you can deviate slightly and interact with the comments of others and react and respond to the comments they make. Please provide open and honest responses to the questions in relation to your experiences prior to and during your PLC experience, whether alone or working together, and regardless of whether or not you may view them as positive or negative and others may have contrasting views. You are encouraged to share any events or experiences which you see as relevant to helping others understand what it has been like for you to improve your practice both prior to and within the PLC model and to give, receive and/or implement feedback during this experience.

Finally, you are reminded that your responses will be kept confidential. Although in this focus group settings participants will know which individual made a particular comment those comments are to be kept in confidence. The writing which results from this research will identify the school district, high school and individual teachers anonymously (Teacher/Administrator A, B, C, etc.). This same anonymous identification method will be applied to all of the data collected and will be kept in confidence between the researcher, the individual participant and each member of the focus group. You are reminded that you'll be asked to review any writing related to your statements prior to publication; this is to ensure that the descriptions created correctly relate both your individual and group experiences and intents.

Guiding Questions:

- How did you as educators, whether individually or collectively, work to improve your practice prior to your exposure to the PLC model currently in use?
 - What sorts of data or feedback did you use to make gauge instructional effectiveness?
 - What sorts of feedback did you receive from others, whether peers or administrators, that impacted your practice?
 - How did you work to improve your teaching?

- Would you explain the background behind how the school/district came to implement the current PLC model or how you first came to experience it?
 - What was it like, as an individual or as an English department, in those early days? The work you did? Benefits and drawbacks to implementation?
 - What sorts of activities did you engage in, either alone or collaboratively, in those early days?
 - How, if at all, has it evolved?
 - Having now worked in the PLC model for a number of years, what would you describe as the strongest features of a PLC? Drawbacks?
- How, if at all, would you say the PLC structure has changed the way in which feedback is brought to you from your colleagues and/or the administrators?
 - How/Did this change pre- and post-PLC?
 - Do/How have any potential changes in feedback delivery/the system lead to a modification of your teaching practice? Could you provide a specific example?
- What sort of work has/is the English PLC done/doing this year? Could you help describe for me what a group meeting is like?
 - Topics you work with and how you work with each other?
 - What sources of data, if any, were reviewed/utilized in this instance?
- This study is interested in the types of and ways in which educators in a PLC give each other feedback, whether formally or informally, and how individuals and the group as a whole respond to that feedback.
 - How would describe how giving feedback works within the group?
 - What types of formal or informal feedback mechanisms do you use?
 - How others respond, whether reinforced or challenged?
 - What recommendations, if any, would you make to this PLC team to improve the quality, frequency, usefulness, etc. of feedback in your current system?
- How would you describe the role that the building administrators play in the PLC model as currently implemented?
 - What type of feedback do administrators provide on the PLC's work? How would you describe your reaction to this feedback?
 - How, if at all, have they made or facilitated changes in light of the feedback you've sent, whether formally or informally?
 - What recommendations, if any, would make in terms of providing or receiving feedback from administration? How, if at all, might this impact your practice?
- How, if at all, has the PLC structure impacted the feedback that you receive on your instructional practice? Are any noted changes an improvement over the ways in which you went about improving your practices prior to the use of this model?
 - Which (the prior method or the PLC model) would you say has led to a greater positive change in your practice? In the practice of the educator or administrators you work with? Please explain.
- What would you say has been the most influential bit of feedback you've received this year be it from a colleague or administrator? How, if at all, has it impacted your instructional practice?
- Is there anything else that you'd like me to know related to PLCs or feedback that you haven't been asked about?

Appendix G

Informed Consent Form - Administrators

University of Minnesota
 Researcher: David J. Roloff
 715-344-8264 | droloff@uwsp.edu
 Advisor: Susan R. Damme
 218-728-2886 | sdamme@d.umn.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research

“The Role of Feedback: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers and Administrators
 Pre and Post Professional Learning Community Engagement”

Administrator Participant Consent Form

You are invited to be a participant in a research study describing the role that feedback plays in the lives of educators pre- and post-involvement in a professional learning community. You were selected as a possible participant because of your current membership in a PLC. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in this study.

This study is being conducted by a student researcher from the University of Minnesota – Duluth, Education Department, who is also an Instructor of English at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

Background Information:

This research is on the role of feedback in professional learning communities; its purpose is to build descriptions of the type of feedback administrators utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they've given and received feedback as they've worked in such a model, and how their membership in and the feedback they've received through the PLC model has led to a modification of practice.

Procedures:

The researcher would like to work with administrators who oversee the high school English PLC team to build descriptions of the administrator's past experiences and how the administrators have given, received, and potentially modified their practice based on formal and informal feedback made available through PLC structures and by the educators whom they oversee. Data will be collected from participants in the following ways both during the school year and over the summer as is necessary; by volunteering for this study participants agree to the following:

1. Participation in an audio-taped Teacher Interview(s)
 - Arranged either electronically or in person at a time that is mutually agreeable
2. A review of the researcher's synthesis prior to the publication of the study to ensure that the experiences represented are in keeping with the participants' descriptions and intents
 - Conducted electronically

Risks and Benefits:

Little is currently known about the specific impacts of feedback within the PLC model. The information participants share and the descriptions which are made possible will make a significant contribution to the PLC literature.

The researcher does not anticipate any foreseeable risks to individuals choosing to participate in this study. Participation in all aspects of the study will likely require 2-3 total hours of the participant's time; data will be collected during the school year and into the summer (as necessary).

University of Minnesota
 Researcher: David J. Roloff
 715-344-8264 | droloff@uwsp.edu
 Advisor: Susan R. Damme
 218-728-2886 | sdamme@d.umn.edu

Confidentiality:

All data collected will be kept in confidence between the individual and the researcher. To ensure anonymity the identity of the school district, high school, and participants will not be disclosed; instead, a fictitious high school name will be used and teachers will be simply identified as Administrator A and B in notes, recordings, during interviews and in transcriptions to maintain confidentiality. Electronic versions of audio-taped interview responses will be stored in a secure and encrypted database. Any print documents or other physical versions of data will be scanned/imported and maintained by David Roloff in the same secure and encrypted database.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time by notifying the researcher in writing (physical or electronic). If you discontinue participation **all data** collected from the participant to date **will be destroyed**.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point.

Contacts and Questions:

The research conducting this study is David J. Roloff. You may raise any concerns or questions you may have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher at Collins Classroom Center 222, The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, 715-346-4341, droloff@uwsp.edu *or* his advisor, Dr. Susan Damme, at sdamme@d.umn.edu, 218-728-2886.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher you are encouraged to contact:

The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point	The University of Minnesota
Dr. Jason Davis, Chair Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Department of Business & Economics University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Stevens Point, WI 54481 (715) 346-4598 Although Dr. Davis will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.	Research Subjects' Advocate Line D528 Mayo 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455 (612) 625-1650.

University of Minnesota
Researcher: David J. Roloff
715-344-8264 | droloff@uwsp.edu
Advisor: Susan R. Damme
218-728-2886 | sdamme@d.umn.edu

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the preceding information and voluntarily give my consent to become a participant in the research study as outlined above. I realize that I may terminate my participation at any time by notifying David Roloff in writing (physical or electronic), at which point any and all data I may have provided will be destroyed.

Signature

Date

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix H

Informed Consent Form – Teachers

University of Minnesota
 Researcher: David J. Roloff
 715-344-8264 | droloff@uwsp.edu
 Advisor: Susan R. Damme
 218-728-2886 | sdamme@d.umn.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research

“The Role of Feedback: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers and Administrators
 Pre and Post Professional Learning Community Engagement”

Teacher Participant Consent Form

You are invited to be a participant in a research study describing the role that feedback plays in the lives of educators pre- and post-involvement in a professional learning community. You were selected as a possible participant because of your current membership in a PLC. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in this study.

This study is being conducted by a student researcher from the University of Minnesota – Duluth, Education Department, who is also an Instructor of English at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

Background Information:

This research is on the role of feedback in professional learning communities; its purpose is to build descriptions of the type of feedback teachers utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they’ve given and received feedback having worked within such a model, and how their membership in and the feedback they’ve received through the PLC model has led to a modification of practice.

Procedures:

The researcher would like to work with members of the high school English PLC so as to learn about their experiences as members of a PLC community and how feedback has led to a modification of practice. Data will be collected from participants in the following ways both during the school year and over the summer as is necessary; by volunteering for this study participants agree to the following:

1. Participation in an audio-taped Teacher Interview(s)
 - Arranged either electronically or in person at a time that is mutually agreeable
2. Participation in an audio-taped Teacher Focus Group
 - To be arranged over the *summer* at a time and place to be determined
3. A review of the researcher’s synthesis prior to the publication of the study to ensure that the experiences represented are in keeping with the participants’ descriptions and intents
 - Conducted electronically

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

Little is currently known about the specific impact of feedback within the PLC model. The information participants share and the descriptions which are made possible will make a significant contribution to the PLC literature.

University of Minnesota
 Researcher: David J. Roloff
 715-344-8264 | droloff@uwsp.edu
 Advisor: Susan R. Damme
 218-728-2886 | sdamme@d.umn.edu

The researcher does not anticipate any foreseeable risks to individuals choosing to participate in this study. Participation in all aspects of the study will likely require 2-4 total hours of the participant's time; data will be collected both during the school year and during a single summer meeting to be arranged.

Confidentiality:

All data collected will be kept in confidence between the individual and the researcher. To ensure anonymity the identity of the school district, high school, and participants will not be disclosed; instead, a fictitious high school name will be used and teachers will be identified as Teacher A, B, C, etc. in notes, recordings, during interviews and in transcriptions to maintain confidentiality. Electronic versions of audio-taped interview and focus group responses and any other electronic data collected will be stored in a secure and encrypted database. Any print documents or other physical versions of data will scanned/imported and maintained by David Roloff in the same secure and encrypted database.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time by notifying the researcher in writing (physical or electronic). If you discontinue participation **all data** collected from the participant to date **will be destroyed**.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point.

Contacts and Questions

The research conducting this study is David J. Roloff. You may raise any concerns or questions you may have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher at Collins Classroom Center 222, The University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, 715-346-4341, droloff@uwsp.edu *or* his advisor, Dr. Susan Damme, at sdamme@d.umn.edu, 218-728-2886.

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University of Minnesota
Researcher: David J. Roloff
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By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the preceding information and voluntarily give my consent to become a participant in the research study as outlined above. I realize that I may terminate my participation at any time by notifying David Roloff in writing (physical or electronic), at which point any and all data I may have provided will be destroyed.

Signature

Date

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix I
Institutional Review Board Approvals

1204E13162 - PI Roloff - IRB - Exempt Study Notification
irb@umn.edu

Sent: Wednesday, April 25, 2012 8:53 AM

To: Roloff, David

To: sdamme@umn.edu, droloff@uwsp.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1204E13162

Principal Investigator: David Roloff

Title(s):

"The Role of Feedback: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers and Administrators Pre and Post Professional Learning Community Engagement"

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic but will give us guidance on what areas are showing improvement and what areas we need to focus on: <https://umsurvey.umn.edu/index.php?sid=94693&lang=um>

11-12.085

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Protocol for Original Submissions

A complete protocol must be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to the initiation of any investigations involving human subjects or human materials, including studies in the behavioral and social sciences.

If the research does not involve vulnerable subjects such as minors or inmates, send **6 copies** of (1) the completed protocol; (2) project abstract; and (3) samples of informed consent forms to the IRB chairperson. PROTOCOLS LACKING ANY ONE OF THESE THREE ELEMENTS WILL NOT BE APPROVED. In addition, copies of questionnaires or interview questions MUST be attached. If the research does involve subjects that may be considered vulnerable, please send 12 copies.

PLEASE TYPE

Project Title: "The Role of Feedback: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Teachers and Administrators Pre and Post Professional Learning Community Engagement"

Principal Investigator: David J. Roloff

Department: English Rank: Instructor

Campus Mailing Address: CCC 222

Telephone: 346-4341 E-mail address: droloff@uwsp.edu

Faculty Sponsor (if required):
(Faculty sponsor required if investigator is below rank of instructor.)

Expected Starting Date: April, 2012 Expected Completion Date: November, 2012

Are you applying for funding of this research? Yes No

If yes, what agency?

Please indicate the categories of subjects to be included in this project. Please check all that apply.

- Normal adult volunteers Minors (under 18 years of age)
- Incarcerated individuals Mentally Disabled
- Pregnant women Other (specify)

(Faculty Member) I have completed the "Human Subjects Protection Training" (available at <http://www.uwsp.edu/special/irb/start.htm>) and agree to accept responsibility for conducting or directing this research in accordance with the guidelines.

David J. Roloff
(Signature of Faculty Member responsible for research)

(Department Chair or equivalent) I have reviewed this research proposal and, to the best of my knowledge, believe that it meets the ethical standards of the discipline.

Mindy Wilk
(Signature of Department Chair or equivalent)

***** Do not write below this line - for IRB use only *****

IRB approval *[Signature]* EXEMPT Date 4-30-12
(Signature of IRB Chair)

Approval for this research expires one year from the above date.
If research is not completed by this date, a request for continuation must be filed and approved before continuing.

Proposal Abstract

Write a brief description of the purpose of the proposed research project. (100-200 words)

This study seeks to learn how educators and administrators describe the type of feedback they utilized and the ways in which they improved their practice prior to exposure to the PLC model, the ways in which they've given and received feedback having worked within such a model, and how their membership and the feedback they've received through this model has led to a modification of instruction. The research will utilize a phenomenological approach intent on building descriptions of how educators experienced the role of feedback prior to and as a member of a professional learning community and the impact of these experiences on their professional thinking and practice.